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THE Black Steed of the Prairies.

Thrilling Story of Texan Adventure.

BY JAMES L. BOWEN,

AUTHOR OF "ONE-EYED SIM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE RANGER'S FIRST SCOUT.

It was spring in Texas; beautiful, warm, glad, sunny spring. The earth, after the repose of the mild winter which that section of the country experiences, was again putting on its most beautiful garments, and preparing itself to run the race of glad summer. The season of lethargy and inaction was over. The silent forces of nature, all the stronger and more subtle for the repose of the last two or three months, were beginning to act; and as their action began to develop itself in myriad forms of beauty, it seemed as though the forces employed, instead of being spent, must react in the renewed energy of the human beings who witnessed the unfolding of nature.

Yet human beings were far from plentiful in Texas then, more especially in the vicinity to which we would particularly call the reader's attention. Blanco county is not extensively settled at the present time, but, at the period of which we write, its population was much more sparse than now. A single settlement, consisting of probably twenty houses, which had clustered together far from all neighbors, for the purpose of mutual protection, might have been observed seated upon the banks of a small and pleasant creek. The beauty and fertility of the place had drawn thither a small colony of settlers, and, from time to time, additions had been made to their numbers, till at present more than a hundred souls were comprised within the limits of Cedarville—such being the significant name which had been bestowed upon the place.

Inside the settlement the stranger might fancy himself still within the bounds of civilization, but let him ride forth upon the balmy morning of this spring day, and he would soon find the idea dissipated. Around them, upon every hand, lay the wide-rolling prairies, diversified by groves of woodland and stretches of forest, with here and there elevations to which the inhabitants gave the dignified name of mountain ranges. There were farms and fields about Cedarville, and some of the early-stirring ones of the farmers had begun to make preparations for their summer's campaign.

From the village came the busy hum of general preparation. The mill was in full blast, finishing the work on hand before the stirring times of full spring should call for every avail-

able laborer. The blacksmith sweat, hammered and blowed from early dawn till dark, preparing horses and oxen, carts and implements, for the wear and tear of the busy season.

The "store," which had been the great resort through the winter, was almost deserted now, for the men began to realize that the time for actual labor had arrived. The last quart of bad whisky had been sold, the building temporarily closed, and the merchant was busily engaged in laying out his garden plot, just in the rear of his dwelling.

So much for Cedarville. As we said, no one in the place would have supposed that he was so far from the "rest of mankind." Eighty miles away the nearest dwellings might be found, a mere settlement, not so large as Cedarville; while still further, in another direction, was Austin, the capital, itself upon the very borders, and exposed to sudden dashes of the fearless Comanches.

To the west of Cedarville, the prairie extended in the most beautiful diversity; forest, plain and gentle hill mingled in the most bewitching variety of scenery. No wonder that the site had been chosen for the nucleus of a great city—for such the founders had confidently expected to see rise, sooner or later, upon the village site. Ten, fifteen, twenty miles away, and still the same features of the landscape were preserved, save that the hills rose higher, and the forest assumed a darker, and at times, more unsightly aspect.

But at the first-mentioned distance we pause, since there appears an object upon the plain with which we have something to do. A single horseman is riding easily, carelessly over the prairie. Although his course is away from Cedarville, and directly into the wilderness where never a white man passed to

remain, we perceive that the stranger is not an Indian. His small, graceful figure, fair complexion, regular features, and brown hair, but little removed from "flaxen" in hue, proclaim his eastern birth.

Eleazar Roberts had come from the eastern states years before, when a mere boy, and since that period his life had been passed upon the frontier of Texas. His health had ever been somewhat delicate, and out-of-door exercise had been prescribed as the only possible means of building up a constitution for him. Such exercise, then and there, meant far more than the words will convey to the general reader. But, in the stirring adventures to which he was thus introduced, the young man seemed to find his life. Nothing else possessed half the interest to him which centered about a reckless dash at buffalo, a bear-fight, or a deer-hunt. Mounted upon his favorite black steed, Ranger, he would gallop away over the plains many a long mile, and the more hair-breadth his escapes, or the wilder the adventures which befell him, the better pleased he was, and the better it seemed for his general health.

Gradually health seemed vouchsafed to Eleazar. Though of small frame, his muscles developed as his favorite pursuits required, and the sunken face gave place to the glow of healthy vigor. Yet his wild life was not relaxed. Now that it was no longer a necessity for him to be abroad upon horseback, his inclinations remained, and year in, year out, he followed the same hazardous life. And none were more skilled than he. Constant practice had made it almost a second nature to him, and woe to the game upon whose track Eleazar chanced to fall! Their fate was almost certain.

Of late, however, other game than quadrupeds had called for the attention of the young hunter. The fierce and unscrupulous Comanches had taken upon themselves the task of driving from their hunting-ground the intruding white men, and more than one frontier settlement had suffered at their hands.

No attempt had as yet been made upon Cedarville, though scouting parties of the Indians had been seen in the vicinity the season previous. Young Roberts had, indeed, encountered some of the parties, but no conflict had taken place, as the scout, who was invariably alone on such occasions, deemed a speedy withdrawal the soundest policy for him.

Now, however, he was looking for the savage foe. Intelligence had reached Cedarville, with much appearance of probability, that the Comanches were upon the war-path, and had pledged themselves to drive out the inhabitants, or destroy them and the place together. Many had disbelieved the report, but Eleazar felt that it might be true, and when morning dawned he saddled up Ranger, and rode forth alone to look for the possible enemy.

Eleazar's manner, as he rode onward over the plains, was such as to have convinced an observer of his ability to compete with the wily savages in border craft. Sitting in his saddle with an easy grace which no study could impart, one hand resting carelessly against his side, while the



THE BLACK STEED OF THE PRAIRIES.

other grasped the reins; casting intense glances toward each covert which might screen a foe, and giving earnest scrutiny to every fresh feature of the landscape; it were difficult to imagine a more perfect picture of self-possession than that presented by the young scout.

The weapons which reposed within a few inches of his hands would have been taken in proof that he was prepared, so far as one man could be, for whatever he might meet. There was his rifle, not particularly long or heavy, but tried and true; a brace of repeating pistols, at that time the especial dread of the Indians upon the border, and a long, keen knife.

It scarcely seemed possible that a face of such unusual beauty, with a form and appearance of almost feminine grace, could belong to a trained hunter and scout. The very name seems suggestive of strength and roughness, yet nothing of the kind appeared in the case of Eleazar Roberts.

Mild blue eyes beamed out from beneath a pale, transparent brow; a soul of gentleness and truth alone seemed looking through them. A regular nose, full and somewhat ruddy cheeks, a faultless chin and firmly marked mouth, the upper lip covered by a silky brown mustache, completed the young man's *tout ensemble*.

The horse which bore him was a powerfully built, jet black animal, with courage and sagacity depicted on his face. He stepped with a proud air, as if exulting in the burden he bore, and seemed fully to enter into the spirit of his master's mission.

Suddenly Eleazar drew upon the rein, and bent his keen glance toward a section of forest some five hundred yards distant. There was no object to be seen, and after a scrutinizing gaze the young man shook his head slowly, and allowed Ranger to resume his pace again.

"Possibly I'm mistaken," the young man mused, half aloud, as he examined the condition of his weapons. "I merely caught a passing glimpse of some object, or fancied I did, but before I could think what it should be it was gone from sight behind that nest of bushes. Possibly it was a deer or buffalo—most likely 'twas—but I certainly fancied it bore more resemblance to a horse than any other animal that is to be found on these prairies. May be it wasn't a horse, but if it was, how came it there?"

Musing upon this question, which was important to him, under the circumstances, he approached within two hundred and fifty yards of the forest, keeping a sharp look-out all the time, not only into the margin of the forest, but in all directions.

Nothing appeared, however, to confirm his first impression that all was not right, and a man less cautious in his temperament than young Roberts might have passed on, conceiving that the supposed horse was only a vision of his imagination. Not so the young scout.

"I am almost within rifle-shot," he muttered, changing the direction of his horse somewhat. "I shall go no nearer till I have made the circuit of this piece of wood, and found what it contains. If Indians are there they must have made a trail, and quite likely I can find it if there is any such thing."

The idea of riding two or three miles about the forest, and keeping up a sharp look-out all the way, not only for signs of trail, but for enemies upon all quarters, would have seemed an excess of caution to many good hunters. But the young man reasoned differently. He knew how many fond friends at Cedarville were exposed to the onslaught of the Indians should they really make a descent there, and no pains seemed too great to get at the truth of the matter. Besides, it would be far from pleasant to leave a force of savages between himself and home in case he should wish to return.

The problem was solved sooner than Roberts had expected, and in a manner somewhat out of his programme. He had proceeded but a few yards upon the new course, when there was an audible movement within the forest, and presently a horse and rider appeared from behind a bank of underbrush.

Eleazar drew up his steed, and turned his head again toward the east, for his worst apprehensions were confirmed by the appearance of a horseman. He was a Comanche, mounted, armed and decked out after the manner of his people when upon the war-path.

But, the Indian seemed to mistrust that the young man was not disposed to seek his acquaintance, and advanced a few paces, making all the amicable signs he could command. He even pointed to the forest behind him and the plain around, to indicate that he was alone, and that his mission was peaceable. Eleazar was not to be deceived. He well knew that Comanches never wandered about singly, for it would be certain death to such as should be caught by any other tribe, or by the whites. Besides, this fellow was clearly upon the war-path, and Roberts felt that this was not the horse he had seen upon the other occasion. These facts were sufficient, in his mind, to justify a widening of the distance between them, and as the Indian slowly trotted down toward him, he gave the rein to Ranger.

The noble animal seemed to know what was required of him, and at once struck upon a slow trot, just sufficient to keep the Comanche at a distance.

With this movement upon the part of the young scouter came an unmasking of the enemy's forces. At least a score and a half of the mounted and painted red-skins burst from the woody covert, and with wild yells set forth in sharp pursuit of the lone white man.

Some half-dozen shots were fired as the party made its appearance, but Eleazar paid no heed to them, not a single ball coming within any thing like dangerous proximity. Seeing at once that the race

must be a ten-mile heat, with life as the stake, the young man set about his proper course to win.

Excepting, perchance, some of the wild tribes of the east, the Comanches are probably unsurpassed, as a body, in the art of horsemanship. Accustomed to it from earliest infancy—almost living, in fact, upon horseback—and each warrior holding a social status according to his skill, there is, certainly, no just reason why such should not be the case.

Recollecting that some thirty of these wily and expert riders were upon the track of the fleeing white man, and mounted upon such steeds as they had provided expressly for the war-path, it will be seen that no ordinary task lay before the scout if he would escape them. No white man could have been better prepared for the race. If the Comanches lived in the saddle, the same could be said of himself. His horse, too, was a picked animal, well conditioned, and probably in better trim for a long race than the majority of the Indian animals. Still, where so many were in pursuit, the odds against the pursued towered in fearful proportions.

But young Roberts did not pause to count the adverse chances. He glanced at the various landmarks which he had passed, and laying his course direct for Cedarville, he urged forward his faithful steed. Away they went with the speed of the wind, the single white man and his host of pursuers. At the first, the Indians seemed ready to glut their fury upon the victim whom they supposed already within their grasp. But, when half a mile was passed, and the black steed had gained perceptibly upon most of the pursuers, they ceased to shout and yell, bending themselves to the object of their race in right good earnest.

A ray of hope lit the young man's soul as he perceived that he held his ground thus far. He had feared most for the first sudden dash, and now that it was over, and the result became a mere matter of speed and endurance, he had little fear that Ranger would prove inferior to the savages' animals in those respects.

On they went. A mile was passed—another and another. The force of the Comanches was now much scattered, such of their animals as had proved inferior falling gradually to the rear, while two or three were unmistakably gaining upon the noble Ranger. Yet, at the present rate they would hardly overtake Eleazar before he would reach the settlement; at the same time their followers would be so scattered, and so far behind, that those in advance would hardly deem it good policy to ride too near the settlement.

The race continued. Nothing upon those smooth prairies to check the mad speed at which they were going, and such woodlands as lay in the way were carefully avoided. Six miles, at least, had been passed. Not more than two-thirds as much remained between the lone white man and safety. Twenty rods behind him came the nearest of his pursuers, three in number, nearly abreast. Quite as far behind came a single Comanche, and the balance of the party was scattered along over half a mile of plain, all equally persistent in the pursuit, as though success depended upon the individual exertions of each member.

Casting back occasional glances, Eleazar saw with anxiety that the nearest of the pursuers were gradually gaining upon him. He endeavored to urge his horse to yet greater exertions, but of this he had no need, for the noble animal was straining every muscle in the work.

"I see you can't go any faster," said Roberts, patting the foam-flecked steed upon the shoulder.

Yet, when he glanced behind he saw that the trio of pursuers were unmistakably nearer than when he had last seen them.

Another mile, and half the distance between them had faded away. Not more than fifty yards separated the pursuers from the pursued. The Indians had attempted to discharge arrows, but, finding that it could not be done without slackening their speed, they had given up the attempt, and devoted every energy to the overhauling of their victim.

Not much longer could the crisis be avoided. Eleazar saw it, and realized that all hopes of reaching Cedarville must be abandoned. Something must be done to check the pursuit, or he never should see it again.

There was his rifle, but he could not think of discharging that under the circumstances. Then he placed a hand upon one of his pistols, and drew it forth. Half turning in the saddle, he quickly discharged a barrel toward his pursuers. A whoop of disdain came from the Indians, as the shot sped harmless; but it was quickly repeated, and this time not in vain. The ball struck a leg of one of the horses, and steed and rider came to the ground in a sprawling confused pile.

Eleazar had no time to see more. The success of his shot had given a momentary check to the other two pursuers, and he did not fail to make the most of their indecision. Almost at the same time, mounting a little roll of the plain, he saw Cedarville, some distance away, but still looming up before him as a haven of safety.

The Indians saw it, too, and whatever may have been their feelings, they paused, and the party gathered about the place where their comrade had been checked in his onward career.

CHAPTER II. THE LOVERS.

HAVING thus gained comparative safety, and seeing the foe abandon the race, Eleazar allowed his horse to slacken its pace, at the same time shifting his position in the saddle somewhat, and casting alternate glances before and behind.

"Breathe a little, good Ranger, breathe," he said, regarding the sweat-reeking condition of the animal

with a sorrowful air; "you have done nobly. It was no fault of yours if you didn't quite distance them Comanche fellows; you did your best, and with a little help from one of these good six shooters we've proved too smart for 'em. Yes, it's true that they've given up the idea of getting hold of us, though the Lord knows what mischief they'll be up to next—I don't."

As he turned his gaze once more toward the setlement, Eleazar beheld something which fixed his attention, and after looking a moment he began slowly muttering to himself:

"That look of dimity is Delta and Euphie, of course; none of the other girls ride out with beaux. Of course, too, it's Henry Vincent with them, and that other one is Erastus Hobert, that's a fixed fact. Henry might ride with his sister, and Erastus with Delta; but that isn't the way it is. Harry never rides unless Cordelia is along, and Erastus—well, never mind. If he wasn't such a noble, good fellow I'd be jealous of him. Why couldn't I have been created tall, and strong, and man-like, as he is? Never mind, Erastus is happy, and I would not disturb him in his bright love-dream."

A silent tear was dashed away from the speaker's eye, and then, as if conscious of his weakness, he seemed starting into renewed life.

"What am I thinking of?" he exclaimed, in tones very different from his own a moment before. "I must warn them of danger. The Indians may see them, and if they should feel so disposed another race would come off. I want the Indians to stay in the background if they will. I feel no satisfaction in this relentless warring and shedding of human blood."

Turning his horse toward the newly-discovered party, he urged him forward at a sharp trot, endeavoring to attract the attention of those he sought by repeated signals. He did not care to shout, for the Comanches might not discover them otherwise, and he had no wish to draw his friends under observation.

At the time of discovery he was some two miles due west of Cedarville, and the riders were some distance to the south-east of him. They had not apparently observed him, but soon caught his signals, pulled up their horses and turned toward him.

There were four of the equestrians who thus waited for Eleazar to gain speaking distance, quite unable to comprehend his continued silence, or understand the suggestive motions which he directed toward the western plains.

The party was equally divided, two being ladies, and the same number of gentlemen acting as their escort. As Eleazar had decided, they were Euphemia Vincent, her brother Henry, Cordelia Tompkins and Erastus Hobert. (With the first three the reader of "Mike, the Guide," is already well acquainted.)

There was nothing especially peculiar in the appearance of Erastus Hobert. Tall, well-formed, with an open face, upon which the impress of noble manliness was indelibly stamped, he seemed just the man to occupy the place he now filled—that of escort to Euphemia. Yet, as we have seen, his presence there was a source of deep grief to Eleazar Roberts, who would have periled all else to hold dear upon earth to have been counted first in the affections of that particular maiden.

Wondering what could so seriously have discomposed the young hunter, the four waited in suspense till he was near enough to communicate with them by word.

"What is the matter, Eleazar?" demanded Henry Vincent, as the former came within speaking distance. "Your horse is pouring with sweat, now, and you look, yourself, as if you had ridden thirty miles this morning."

"Harry," said Eleazar, pulling up his horse, "I fear the day of our doom is at hand. The plains are swarming with Comanches! I've just had a race of about ten miles with them. There were thirty, at least, in that gang, and you know they always go in bodies. They are just over that big roll, partly behind that strip of woods, now, and I think the best thing you can do is to get back to Cedarville, and spread the news. There would be sad work if they should dash into our little village."

Casting half-frightened glances in the direction of the enemy, the party quickly turned their horses and rode back to the settlement, Erastus galloping off to warn a party of men who were working at some distance from the place.

An opportunity was thus afforded for Eleazar to ride in beside Euphemia, and of this he promptly availed himself. He had no opportunity to converse with her, if he had wished to do so, since he was required to relate the story of his morning adventure in full, and by the time this was done to the satisfaction of the listeners, they had gained the confines of the settlement.

They had scarcely entered the street when they met two men walking very slowly toward the open fields.

"Father, the Indians are coming!" cried Cordelia Tompkins, bending toward the elder, and raising her hand by way of warning.

"Who brings this story?" demanded the companion of the man addressed, regarding the horse of young Roberts with keen glance, but directing his question to Euphemia.

He was a short, heavily-set man, evidently some thirty years of age, with a physiognomy which many persons would have called handsome. To the close reader of the human face, however, there seemed too much of evil fire in that black eye, and too much of animal passion stamped about the mouth, concealed though it was by heavy masses of beard. The brow, too, was low and narrow, though the hair curled away from it in very splendid waves.

There were many in Cedarville who did not quite trust Felix Drake, for he had not long been a resident of the place, and there was that in his manner which careful men and women did not like. He had been there long enough, however, to become not only a professed lover, but an earnest suitor for the hand of Euphemia Vincent. True, he met little encouragement from any source, but he announced his intentions quite as strongly, and since Captain Jonah Tompkins found something to rather admire in his character, those who knew or professed to know most about it, fancied Felix might stand a better chance to win the prize than either Eleazar or Erastus.

Not of this mind, however, was the lady herself. The attentions he endeavored to force upon her were any thing but pleasant, and she took every opportunity to render him aware of the fact. All did not do, however. He was bold and persistent, and the evil glance of his eye, as it rested upon Eleazar, riding beside the object of his regard, could not be mistaken.

"Eleazar brings the news," said Euphemia, quietly, in answer to the rather impertinent question.

"When I see Injuns 'round, I'll be convinced that may be some danger," was the retort, rather contemptuously given.

"A race of ten miles, with thirty Comanches behind me, gave all the proof I wanted," said Eleazar, quietly.

"You don't mean to say that you was too smart for thirty Injuns on a long stretch, I hope!" exclaimed the fellow, with half-lifted hands, regarding the speaker with mock astonishment.

"Not by any means. But I do say that I had a race for life with that number, and here I am!"

"I give it up; you can tell a bigger story than I can," was the insulting rejoinder.

"If you will ride out to the square of wood beyond the second plain, you can satisfy yourself as to what I say being true or false."

The young man was much angered at the insolence of the fellow, but he had borne it repeatedly, though it cost severe effort to keep from a stinging retort.

"I'm not used to bein' sent off on fool's arrants," was the last sentence of the fellow, as he turned away.

"What a conceited simpleton!" remarked Euphie, as the vain braggart turned the nearest corner. "I could box his ears soundly for questioning you like that!"

There was fire in the maiden's eyes and speech, so that Eleazar took courage to say:

"It makes no difference to me what others say, if you believe me, Miss Euphemia!"

The maiden started, and colored slightly, while Jonah Tompkins broke in upon the silence by exclaiming, in rather loud tones:

"Well, Roberts, if what you say is so, I suppose the sooner we begin to notify folks the better."

"If you are disposed to doubt my word, I can only tell you what I told Felix Drake. A short ride will convince you. My first business will be to attend Ranger, who needs care after the race he has had."

"I don't disbelieve ye," was the quick response. "But then, it seems so wonderful that you should reach Cedarville in safety with such a pack at your heels."

The sometime captain hastened away, and the other members of the group did likewise. A hum and bustle, pale faces and frightened aspects told that the fearful news was rapidly spreading. Mothers gathered their children about them; men rushed to their dwellings and put their arms in order, reloading such as were empty, while their hands trembled, and each window or door was put in requisition to note the earliest appearance of danger.

CHAPTER III. THE SETTLERS' DEFENSE.

Now more than a quarter of an hour could have elapsed from the moment of Eleazar's arrival, and anxious parties were still busy with the various preparations, when the gallop of a horse, and loud shouting without, startled nearly every soul in Cedarville. Hastening to doors and windows, they saw Erastus Hobert galloping into the place, swinging his hat above his head, and shouting:

"To arms! To arms! The Indians are comin' like mad!"

No wonder that many a heart stopped its pulsations for the moment, and many a shriek of despair rose upon the still morning air. As we said, the inhabitants of Cedarville had settled in proximity to a common center, in order that they might afford mutual protection to each other in times of danger. Yet so confident had they felt of unmixed prosperity, that no plan for concerted action, no system of general defense had been agreed upon. Not even a house in the place had been duly fortified, so that it might withstand the assaults of any considerable body of foes.

Under these circumstances, each man could only make his own dwelling as much of a fortress as possible, and stand upon the defensive to the best of his ability. No sooner did the wild-looking horseman, with his terrible tidings, pass up the street, than a general closing and barricading of doors took place. The non-combatants sought such places of safety as presented, while the men, with tightly grasped weapons, stood watching for the expected onset.

Like a rushing wind, twenty-five or thirty Indian warriors came dashing into the principal street of the place, and proceeded some distance before making any hostile demonstration.

So sudden was their appearance, so rapid their movements, and so fierce their aspect, that none of the many marksmen waiting for them dared to fire till it was too late. When the nerve necessary to

pull the trigger was gained, the enemy had passed, and the men reflected that perhaps it would be better to wait for some overt act, after all. If such a plea was really any thing more than a vain excuse, it was soon set aside, for the Comanches were bent upon mischief.

Eleazar Roberts feeling that the first care should be bestowed upon the noble animal whose exertions had saved him from a horrible death, rode Ranger directly to his stable, and proceeded to groom and feed him with his usual care. Started by Hobert's cry, he collected his weapons, closed and locked the door, and started for his dwelling-place, not far distant.

He did not reach it undisturbed. When near the door, he was espied by the savages, who had just dashed into the place. A cry was raised, and several of them turned their horses toward him, brandishing their weapons, and uttering many unmistakable expressions of pleasure at having encountered him again.

Eleazar was truly brave, and consequently not taken aback by the movement of the savages. He knew that nothing but the most prompt action could save his life, and that a stand, once taken, must be maintained until death or deliverance came to him.

Springing behind a wood-pile, sufficiently large to screen most of his body, the intrepid young scout leveled his rifle across the top, and brought it to bear upon the foremost of the Indians.

No sooner did that dark muzzle look them in the face, than their purpose seemed to become shaken. The Comanche might not have realized that there was hardly one chance in a hundred of his reaching the object of his wrath. But he knew the risk he was running well enough to pause, and his example was followed by those who came behind him.

Under other circumstances it is probable that a single person, presenting such a determined front, would have been left to enjoy the advantages of his position; but the savages had an especial affection for Eleazar, and a plan was at once adopted to ensnare him.

While the present party remained in front to watch him, another squad sought out some way by which they could gain a position in his rear, and thus take him at a disadvantage. The young man realized that this plan was likely to succeed without a reasonable chance for a failure, and it would be no more than justice to say that he began to look anxiously for some means of escape from his unpleasant position. He was upon the point of attempting something desperate, when the door of the nearest house was opened, and a cheery voice sung out.

"This way, Le; run like mad, and we'll tend to the Injuns!"

It was Erastus Hobert who spoke, and close to him stood Henry Vincent and Captain Tompkins, with weapons ready.

If Eleazar had cared to hesitate, there was no opportunity now, for the Comanches had gained his rear, and set up a shout of triumph as they beheld him. Those in front, too, began to press up, so that no time was to be lost. Catching a revolver in his right hand, and running his eye over the ground before him, the young man darted for the open door.

Almost at the same instant some of the Indians made a similar move; but two shots from the door, one of which took fatal effect, checked them. Seeing that the one they cared most to secure was certain to escape, a number of them sprung from their horses and began to assail the building.

The house was not massively built, but, under present circumstances, it was folly for the Comanches to assault it, since they were directly in the midst of the village. No sooner, therefore, did the defenders of the house commence firing from the windows, than the other inhabitants began to awaken to a sense of their duty, and from a dozen buildings came the deadly missiles, carrying destruction into the ranks of the exposed Indians.

Two of the Comanches were killed, and three mortally wounded, within a very short time, when it appeared to their fellows that their most politic course would be to withdraw. This they did, with nearly as much speed as they had used in making their entrance, leaving their dead, and as many wounded horses.

Repeated cheers rent the air at this turn of affairs, and in a moment, more than a score of men, with rifles in their hands and pistols peeping forth, were walking over the scene of conflict. Some of the first were able to secure mementoes of the affray, which others regretted much that they were not able to obtain, but the general good feeling was too great to allow of any contentions. Every one declared the victory to be complete. A little plunder had been picked up by the savages, and a few horses and cattle changed owners without due legal process; but beyond that the dash had been a total failure.

The joy of the settlers was great, and measures for prompt action in time to come were immediately advanced. But where all had a plan, and each wished to elucidate his own above all others, it is easy to see that, apart from the confusion of language, incident to the occasion, there was no one to listen.

Jonah Tompkins noticed the state of affairs, and raising his voice, he remarked:

"If five or six of you will volunteer to keep watch that the enemy does not surprise us, I will invite the balance of you to my house, where we will decide what is best to be done for our future safety."

The necessary volunteers were finally obtained, and when they had set forth, the balance of the party, now much swelled in numbers, set out for the house of Captain Tompkins.

The first measure proposed was to put the entire village under the command of one man, who should be obeyed in all things. This proposition was at

once adopted, and then came a severe task, that of choosing the man. Twelve "Regulators" comprised the peace-preserving force of the place in ordinary times, and eleven of that number were present. They were naturally anxious that their chief should be the favored one; but "Captain" Jonah Tompkins had once commanded a militia company in South Carolina, and the preference was given to him.

"Three cheers for Cap'n Tompkins!" called out one of the Regulators, with commendable frankness. They were given with true backwoods gusto, each one of the party present joining to the full extent of his lungs. When quiet was again restored, Tompkins rose to his feet, and proceeded to thank them for the favor conferred upon him. He then proclaimed his views of the situation, assuring those who listened that he had no doubt the Comanches would make desperate efforts to avenge their loss, and drive off such of the settlers as they could not destroy.

Unprepared for such a visitation, the only hope of the white men lay in constant watchfulness, never allowing the savages to take them by surprise. This precaution together with the advantages they possessed of acting upon the defensive, and possessing superior weapons, would no doubt enable them to conquer in any assault which the savages might make.

The better to assist him in reducing the whole matter to a system, he proposed to divide the forces into three squads, which should relieve each other, at fixed intervals, in keeping a sharp watch upon the movements of the Indians. The different detachments he proposed to place under the three men in whom he had most confidence as leaders, and whom they named: Eleazar Roberts, Henry Vincent, and Erastus Hobert.

There was evidently some little dissatisfaction with a portion of the men in regard to the subordinates thus selected, but a sense of the danger which threatened them overcame all minor jealousies, and they acquiesced in the arrangement with cordial good feeling.

The squads were then divided off and numbered, the one under Henry Vincent going upon duty at once. The families left without suitable protection by this arrangement were directed to take up quarters with such of their neighbors as were better defended, and every man was to remain within springing distance of his arms till further notice was given.

It was somewhat past noon when these preparations were made, and those not upon duty soon sought their several abodes, to assure their anxious families that all was well.

The afternoon passed in quiet. No demonstrations were made by the Comanches, nor were any of them seen. Many, indeed, began to feel a degree of certainty that they had left the place. This idea, however, was soon dispelled. About the middle of the afternoon scouts were sent out, to scour the country. Not three miles from Cedarville they were fired upon on approaching a wood, and one of their number slightly wounded. Plenty of dusky forms were seen in the forest, and after giving back shots at long range, the rangers turned and rode back to the settlement. For some reason they were not pursued, the savages evidently choosing to keep their own counsel.

Commotion and excitement ruled once more in Cedarville upon their report being heard.

Every one was now convinced that they must suffer another attack when darkness should add its horrors to the scene.

That terrible agent of the Indians, fire, would no doubt be employed, and they realized how ill prepared the place was to withstand the devouring element.

In the evening there would be a moon, to render the darkness less favorable, but after midnight this would not be the case, and then it was that the most was to be feared.

Under these circumstances Captain Tompkins

called in his subordinates, and a discussion was held

as to the best course to be pursued.

It was thought best to assemble the entire population of the village

together in a single house, before darkness came on, each bringing their most valuable articles with them, for safe-keeping.

But where they were to gather, it was not so easy to determine. It was now that the need of a blockhouse was particularly felt.

The building must be one to admit of the most vigorous defense, so situated as to leave no covered way for the savages to approach it, and in a position least liable to take fire if a general conflagration should become the order of the night.

All of these requirements could not be fully met in any single dwelling, but one was selected after a general examination, containing plenty of room, and favorably located. The tidings were spread, and at once the fear-stricken ones began to flock thither with such valuables as they could convey.

Darkness came, and though it brought no rest to any in Cedarville, it found them all prepared. A dozen brave men were outlying for any appearance of the foe, and twice that number waited within the improvised fortress for any signals of alarm. Lights burned carefully shaded, so that none without should become aware of the force there gathered.

The night was not far advanced, when one of the men, sitting close to a window, peeping through an opening which had been made to answer the purpose of a loop-hole, gave a start and slight exclamation, immediately beckoning Captain Tompkins to his side.

"Look yonder," he remarked, pointing to a hedge-row at some little distance, "that's an Injun behind them yere bushes, jest as sartin as we're born men. I seen him come out from abhind them bushes. He's aimin' at that house of Rawlins's, or I'm mistaken."

"You are certain of it, are you?" the captain asked.

"In coarse I be, cap'n. When I see a feller, I carkilate I know him. I reckin I'll tell a red from a white man, cap'n."

"I hardly see what a single Indian can be doing, skulking about in that manner," said Tompkins, his face revealing the perplexity he felt.

"I think it's to be seen," suggested Eleazar, who was present. "He is a spy. You can see that he must be shrewd, to have avoided our pickets, and gotten in here. I think his intention is to kindle a fire near this place, and while we are engaged in putting it out, his imps will make a dash upon us."

"On my word, Le, I think you may be right."

"I will take two or three men and go out. Dead or alive, we'll bring him in, so that you can all see how he looks."

"I'm afraid you'll get into trouble, my boy."

"No danger in the world. We'll be so still about it that a mouse would not think we're after him."

While speaking thus, Eleazar had selected two men, one of them being the person who had made the discovery, and glided forth very silently from a door upon the opposite side of the house.

Moving with the utmost caution, and taking the most secluded route, the trio rapidly neared the place where they confidently expected to find the Indian. Nor were they disappointed. In an obscure angle of the building they saw a crouching form, which proved to be that of a Comanche.

How Eleazar's blood rushed at the prospect! Nervously clasping his knife, he whispered his directions in the ears of his companions. One was to move with him, the other to cut off the savage's retreat in case he should discover them.

"Don't shoot on any account," was the last order, "unless he makes a fuss loud enough so that it won't do any hurt. We'll take him alive, if possible."

Waiting a moment for the other to gain his allotted position, the twain moved forward as silently as possible. They were discovered when within ten feet, and the Comanche bounded quickly away. But he ran not far. His foot was caught by an unseen hand, armed with giant strength, and he found himself thrown violently to the earth.

Before he could recover or even cry out, he was seized by the throat and held, his arms firmly bound behind him, and the cold muzzle of a pistol pressed to his head.

"Get up!" was the brief command.

For a wonder, the Indian obeyed, rising suddenly to his feet.

"Now tramp; and make no noise, if you want to live a moment longer!"

Again he obeyed, and, indeed, it was not well to be avoided, as a burly white man held each arm, while the third walked behind, pressing the cold-mouthed reminder to his head.

They were not long in reaching the rendezvous, where the captive exhibited unmistakable signs of surprise at beholding the abundant preparations which had been made for defense. But after a single glance or two he became calm and stolid again.

Hoping to gather some information from the prisoner, Captain Tompkins took him aside and gave him a vigorous plying with interrogatives, but to little effect. So far as it suited his purpose, the savage could be communicative enough. He was free to confess that it was the intention of his companions to destroy the place; that the party was led by a wild young chief, who longed for the distinction, and who would not hesitate to sacrifice most of his warriors if it could be accomplished; that if the present party did not prove sufficiently strong, the entire force of the tribe was pledged; and come what would, that moon should see an end to the settlement. When his own fate was spoken of, he did not seem at all apprehensive; but reminded them that the day of reckoning was not far distant, when his comrades would avenge him most fully.

More than this could not be drawn from him. After a series of efforts, which only exhausted time without bringing any results, the attempt was given over. Additional bonds were placed upon his limbs, and he was stowed away under guard.

That he had gained the place with the hope of kindling a fire, was quite evident, he having been caught in the act. That the blaze of the flames was intended as a signal to his companions, they also felt certain. In any case, there could be no doubt that an assault was intended during the night, and it was deemed best to send word of what had transpired to those upon guard, so that their vigilance might be doubled.

Several men volunteered to bear the message, but Eleazar insisted upon being allowed to depart, and soon left upon the perchance perilous mission. After delivering the tidings he brought, the intrepid young hunter moved out nearly half a mile in the direction where the Indians were last heard of, returning satisfied that they were not at hand upon that quarter.

Reaching the rendezvous a short time before midnight, he found that he must at once set about relieving those now posted, with his own squad. As he was passing out at the door, a fair hand was placed upon his arm.

"Do you think there is danger that the Indians will break in upon us again during the night, Eleazar?"

It was the anxious face of Euphemia Vincent which looked up into his own. His very soul thrilled for the moment. He longed to clasp her in his arms, and give her the assurance that there was no danger. But this he could not do, feeling morally certain that, before he should return to the house again, another harvest of death would have been reaped in that lately quiet settlement. Too many sad thoughts were connected with the idea to allow of its being entertained for a moment, and endeavoring to assume a cheerful look, he replied,

"I hope not; but if they do come, they will find us prepared for them."

The maiden turned away sad, having read the young man's feelings from his manner. She rejoined the women and children, many of whom had found temporary forgetfulness in slumber. Imitating their example, Euphie spread a blanket upon the floor,

placed a pillow upon one end of it, and sought, though for some time in vain, to woo the drowsy god to her embrace.

Sleepless sentinels were posted at loop-holes in all parts of the building, peering anxiously into the darkness for any signs of Indians. An hour, two, passed; and still all was quiet. The timid began to hope, and one after another of those not upon duty sunk to sleep, with their arms beside them.

Suddenly there came a flash upon the darkness, a loud report, and a cry of warning, evidently from the lungs of a white man. In an instant every one was on foot, with weapons clenched, waiting anxiously for the next development.

For some time all remained so quiet that they began to think the shot had been an accidental discharge, or a false alarm. But no definite conclusions had been reached when three or four shots in quick succession were given at no great distance from the place of rendezvous, followed by yells and shrieks as of fiends let loose.

Surely the Indians in large force were not far away, perhaps even under the walls of the building; and their movements had been so silent that the closest listening had failed to catch any indications of their approach! What was to be done? This silent attack had not been expected, and no preparations had been made to meet it. Where the Comanches might be, could only be determined by their occasional yells, and even these had now almost ceased.

"What shall we do?" asked Captain Jonah of Hobert, who stood beside him. "I own up, I don't know what is for the best."

"I don't know what to do, cap'n. Perhaps I'd better take my squad out, and pitch into 'em, as Eleazar has with his. Hear the fellows pop away! I'm afraid they're having a hard time."

"We must help them," said Tompkins, who really felt fearful lest the valiant band should be annihilated. "Perhaps one of you had better go out and try to help him."

"I will go," said Henry Vincent, speaking quickly and energetically. "My squad is the freshest. Come, squad two!"

"Squad two" was promptly on hand, and opening a small back-door, the daring little band debouched in search of adventure, some of them going to their death.

Nothing of the kind could exceed in horror such a night-attack. With no defense which could serve them against a vigorous onslaught, assailed by a foe whom they could not see, and of whose strength they were unaware, with two-thirds of their force abroad, seeking in the darkness for their prowling enemies, the situation of the settlers was any thing but pleasant. The men remained at the loop-holes, watching anxiously for the appearance of their copper-hued foes, and, doubtless, a score of the miscreants were within reach of their rifles, if the darkness could be lifted for a moment.

Jonah Tompkins and Hobert walked from room to room, below and above, hoping to hear something which would allow them to judge of the state of affairs

without. But, save now and then the crack of a weapon, all was still—oh, so still and dreadful!

The women and most of the children had risen, and were sobbing alone, or were talking in low, sad tones of friends who were exposed to all the danger, and who might even now, have fallen in the strife.

Erastus Hobert paused in his restless walk, for a grasp, almost wild, was placed upon his arm, and Euphie clung convulsively to him.

"What do you think? Do you suppose Eleazar will be killed?" she asked, gazing into his features, which were hardly revealed by the dim light.

"I don't know—I trust not," was the half-absent reply. Then, recollecting himself, he added,

"Why do you ask? Is he so much dearer to you than all others in Cedarville?"

It is possible that there may have been a slight tinge of jealousy in his tones, but Euphie was too excited to notice it. Only she quickly replied,

"Not that, Erastus; but you know what a dear good boy he is, and how much we should all miss him."

"Yes, I do know it, Euphie. His is a noble nature. I should not blame you for loving him, even if it doomed me to disappointment!"

Something further might have been said, at that time, but a quick call from one of the look-outs reached Hobert's ears, and he hastened to the place.

Just before he reached the scene, however, there came the flash and report of the man's rifle, followed by a jubilant exclamation, as he fell to reloading:

"Durn their old carcasses! Thar's one less of 'em, any how. That feller showed his painted mug when the fire shined on't, and I jest put a ball through it!"

"Bravo for Jack!" rose upon all hands.

Upon looking forth, the state of affairs was readily comprehended. The Indians had succeeded in setting fire to some buildings, and the light from the flames was gradually dispelling the utter darkness of the night. One of the villains had ventured too near the glare, and a bullet from Jack's gun had cut short his career. Other forms were seen flitting hither and thither, and eager rifle-barrels followed their movements.

As the flames mounted higher, and the light spread, Indians were seen in various directions and positions, all of whom were saluted by shots from those who first espied them.

Gradually the attention of the red-men was drawn to the building, and soon a half-score more had gathered behind a neighboring dwelling, with the purpose of making an attack. The supposed weak point was duly selected, and the massing of the Indians completed for the rush, when they were startled by a sharp volley, which sent three or four from their midst, and the next moment a band of well-armed settlers was upon them.

Taken by surprise as the Comanches were, they did not attempt to hold their ground, but fled, receiving a volley from

the extempore fortress as they broke cover.

Meanwhile, the flames mounted higher and higher, extending from one building to another, either from natural causes or by the hand of the savages, till already nearly half the settlement was in flames.

But the assault was at an end. The power of the savages had been broken by the last blow. One after another of their number had fallen, till only a mere handful remained. The red glare of the fire-light revealed more fully the ghastly numbers of those who had fallen, and the survivors bade a hasty adieu to the place. Their horses' feet had been muffled in coming in, so as to make no noise, and in like silent manner they departed, leaving their fallen to the mercy of the inhabitants of the burnt and plundered settlement.

CHAPTER IV.

A Mournful Morning.

"Come out and fight fire; the blasted Injins hev gone!" was the cry of a frontier Stentor, as he dashed by the house from which so many anxious ones were peeping forth.

"Thank God for the victory!" said Captain Jonah, and the response was taken up by many of those present.

"Come on, my hearties!" shouted Erastus Hobert, throwing open the door and rushing forth. "There is work to be done yet."

And so it must have seemed to each one of his followers, as they stepped upon the threshold of the door. The entire lower half of the village was in flames, some of the houses enveloped past all possibility of reclaim, and others but just kindling. Active forms were seen flitting about, but they were the forms of friends.

As the new party reached the scene of the fire, evidences of the desperate struggle were but too thickly strewn all about. Here an Indian, there another, and anon a fallen settler was to be seen; for all of whom the world of strife and wars had passed away for ever. But even their dead friends could not be regarded now. The monster foe still raging in their midst was to be subdued, or they would all be left homeless. The task was no ordinary one. A well-appointed fire company, with the latest improved steam-engines, would have been well tasked to meet such a conflagration. The air was so heated and filled with smoke that one could scarcely breathe, while showers of sparks and cinders went off to spread the devouring element.

"Let it burn!" shouted Tompkins, as his eye took in the scene. "Let it burn; but save the upper part."

Fortunately this seemed practicable, and toward it the efforts of all the men were directed. The wind was in their favor, and a creek was near, so that a line of men was quickly formed, reaching from the bank to the buildings most endangered, and buckets of water passed in quick succession from hand to hand.

The roofs and sides being kept constantly drenched, even the fierce heat and

occasional fall of sparks did not kindle them.

The buildings at that particular point having been first lighted, were naturally consumed first, so that the heat gradually subsided, and the efforts of the exhausted men correspondingly relaxed. But, if the safety of a portion had been insured, it was with sorrowful faces that the settlers gazed upon that sea of flame, which no human power could control, and beheld the utter desolation of half Cedarville. Houses, goods, provisions, implements, all were ascending heavenward in great masses of smoke and flame.

Daylight was just beginning to struggle up in the east, when a horseman rode into the untouched portion of the settlement, and after withdrawing the Indian blanket which covered his figure from view, proved to be none other than Eleazar Roberts.

The smoke and powder blackened heroes, who were just ceasing from their toil, and beginning to think of their fallen companions, gathered around him with many expressions of satisfaction.

"Whar ye been?" demanded a tall, ungainly fellow, with frank cordiality beaming upon every lineament of his face. "Durned if we didn't think you'd gone under; wal, we did, by thunder."

"Not so bad as that," returned the young scout, with a smile. "I've been taking a ride with the Comanches, to see if they really meant to leave us, or only went off to trap us."

"You did? Wal, how is it? Be the critters honest or not?"

"I didn't see more than seven or eight of them, all told, that rode away, so I hardly think it probable they will come back. But my idea is that, sooner or later, we shall see another force of them. How have our folks fared in the long run?"

"We are just going to see, now that we have got the fire within bounds," said Captain Tompkins. "Do you go up to the house, where the ladies will feel glad to see that you are safe."

"Not I," was the quick reply. "When all the dead have been picked up, and there is no danger of the fire, it will be time enough to think of rest."

A general search was held, and the fallen collected in two bodies. When no more of either hue could be found, the mournful count was taken.

Three of the white men had been wounded, and made their way to the house. Laid upon the green turf, in front of the general rendezvous, were seven others, who had fallen to rise no more! Around them a mournful, weeping band had gathered.

Upon the opposite side of the street were placed eighteen Comanches, either dead or so severely wounded that they could not long survive. All who had been able to crawl away seemed to have done so.

Surely this was sorrow enough to have come in a single night! One-half the smiling settlement of the day before a mass of smoking, flaming ruins; twenty-five cold, stiff forms lying there upon the turf, and others wounded, bleeding, suffering! Surely a day of horrors had fallen upon Cedarville.

"Where is Felix Drake?" was asked, when all the dead had been brought in, and every person accounted for with the single exception of the individual named. "Who has seen him?"

It was quite easy to ascertain who had not seen him, but no one seemed to know any thing of his whereabouts. Many a tragical fate and errand of daring similar to that performed by Eleazar, were suggested as accounting for his absence. Indeed the majority began to reckon one more in their count of the casualties of the night.

"That miserable Drake is up to the house," said a woman, who overheard some remark which was made in regard to his supposed fate.

"What is he doing? He has no business there!" exclaimed a half-dozen voices at once.

"Here he comes; you can ask him."

At that moment the person under consideration stepped from the door and approached the party at a brisk pace.

He had been seated beside one of the loop-holes when the call to "fight fire" was given, and although he heard the order, obedience was no part of his intentions. Keeping his position till the house was emptied of its male occupants, save the wounded, who found their way in and were promptly attended to by the ladies, he commenced walking back and forth, glancing out upon all sides as if in fear of the enemy, though he saw only his fellow settlers toiling heroically to stave the sweep of the devouring flames.

"Drake, you can't do any particular good here; why don't you go out and help fight the fire?" groaned a poor fellow who was suffering from a shattered arm.

"I wish the fire was checked," the shrewd fellow returned with an air of great apparent anxiety; "but I don't feel that it would be right to go and leave all these women exposed as they would be. Some man ought to be here, for them Comanches may be lurking around and break in afore any body knows what they are about."

But Felix Drake was watching for an opportunity, his eyes constantly following the movements of Euphemia. He felt that now was the time for him to make some brave advances, and he trusted that the citadel of the maiden's heart might be reduced by one or two well-directed shots.

Presently the opportunity he sought was presented. The maiden paused before a window and looked forth at the fiery scene presented to her gaze. He stopped beside her.

"Those brave fellows work nobly," he began, with the air of one who feels what he is saying. "I wish my duty would permit me to be with them."

"And why not?" Euphemia asked, turning full upon him. "I see no necessity for your remaining here."

Her searching gaze made him feel uncomfortable, but he would not abandon the field without a single shot.

"I can not go," he said, in low, plausible tones, "and leave you here with no protection more able than yourself. I never should forgive myself if harm should

come to any of you—to *you* especially—by my neglect!"

"Do you fancy that we should be *very* much safer in your presence?" the maiden asked, bitterly.

"I do not know," was the tart reply. "I have a knowledge of weapons and am not quite a coward. If any dire chance should call for assistance, I *might* be of some service."

"We are quite willing to take the risk," was the emphatic rejoinder. "There is the place for brave men," and she pointed to the toiling settlers, who were struggling against the fire-fiend.

Felix was nonplussed, and somewhat annoyed by this decided language; but, curbing his resentment, he turned away, saying, in the same plausible tones, he had first used,

"You speak as though I was a coward. Possibly love for you has made me so. I only trust I can prove to you at some future time what you seem to doubt at present."

Upon one pretext or another he continued to walk the rooms till daylight. When the fallen had all been collected, he walked forth, meeting the sharp inquiries which greeted him with his usual plausibility.

The morning sun rose upon a sad, sad scene. Although the settlers had succeeded in driving off the Indians, all felt that it had been done at a great cost; indeed, the victory was all too dearly won. If they mourned their fallen companions, from the tender common ties which had existed between them, the loss was not more severe to their prosperity as a settlement, perchance not as severe as that of houses, goods and animals. Besides, the damage they had inflicted on the Comanches was far from trifling, and there was every probability that the tribe would take speedy measures to avenge their fallen braves.

Under these circumstances it was but natural that some thought of seeking a place of safety before they should share the fate that had befallen their less fortunate companions. The voice of one gradually became that of many. The women and children unanimously, and many of the men, clamored for an abandonment of ill-fated Cedarville, and a retreat to some point where assistance could be had to repel further advances of the Comanches.

Gradually the entire remaining population gathered in a sort of council, and those most earnest for the migration hesitated not to urge their friends to join in the scheme.

"What are a few dollars," they urged, "what are houses and farms, even, compared with the lives of ourselves and children? Let us leave all, and seek safety before it is for ever too late."

One by one assented that their best interests seemed to lie in a withdrawal, and announced their intention to seek safety nearer civilization, let come what would.

Captain Tompkins was appealed to at length, and silence fell over those assembled to hear what he should say in regard to the contemplated evacuation.

"To my mind," he said, "it is best either to abandon the place or take some measures for better protecting ourselves. I scarcely know which would be the better way. I

could tell you what I think, but all might not agree with me."

"Speak 'er out. Let's have it," said several voices. "Let us know what you think."

"There is just this much about it," said Tompkins, speaking slowly, and weighing his words. "If we leave this we shall have to go to Austin—that is settled. It is full a hundred miles there. We can't go it in less than three days, with what teams we can rig up. While on the way we shall be exposed to constant assaults from the Indians, if they choose to molest us further, and we can make but little defense against a large body of them. To my mind we can make our position here much stronger than the attempt to flee. If we leave this place, we shall not only give up all to the hands of the Comanches, but incite them to open a warfare all along the border. If we hold on to what we have, and give them a good fight, we shall be able to hold them in check till a force can come from Austin to our assistance. I am in favor of trying the latter, by all means."

"But how will any one convey word to Austin of our peril?" asked a fearful citizen. "If the whole body of us can not safely pass, where will a single messenger be found?"

"And on the other hand, if one man, mounted upon a fleet animal, can not reach the place in safety, how will the whole body proceed, hampered as we shall be with goods and wagons, women and children? My plan is to stay and fight like men for our homes and friends, and honor, while one or two, on the fleetest horses that can be procured, depart for help. In this manner we shall show the Indians that we are not a band of cowards!"

"That's the talk, cap'n!" said some of the more daring; while many among the disconcerted still wavered in their decisions.

"I say, stay and fight, like the *men* we profess to be!" exclaimed Eleazar Roberts, rising upon a bench. "Who else says so?"

One and another echoed his words, till it seemed that the idea was really in favor with those who had been almost panic-struck a few moments before.

"I feel safe in thinking that all had rather stay than leave their houses, after all," said Tompkins. "Now, the question is, who will volunteer to ride to Austin?"

For a moment there was no response, and then Eleazar stepped forth.

"With Ranger under me, I am ready to try it," he said, calmly. "I think we can make the trip."

Now that the matter was taking a definite form, there were several who seemed quite anxious to accompany the young scout. Since one might fail, it was deemed best to select two, and as the matter could be decided in no other way, the lot was resorted to. Eleazar refused to withdraw in any case, and the cast was made for one to accompany him. Bits of paper were marked and drawn. It fell upon Erastus Hobert!

No sooner was the lot determined than Eleazar advanced, with hand outstretched, which Erastus at once grasped.

"So it is you and I," he said, with a smile of satisfaction. "I could not ask for a better companion."

"Nor I. I feel sure we shall succeed."

"We must. There shall be no such word as *fail*. We can not afford it, with all these people depending upon us."

"True; true. And now, since we must be going, let us lose no time in getting ready."

The two young men left the building, to prepare their steeds for the journey. Just without the door they separated, as their animals were quartered in different stables.

CHAPTER V.

Old Sam.

"Le, my boy," said a familiar voice, as young Roberts neared the stall occupied by Ranger, "you are goin' ontew a mighty skeery bizness. D'ye know that?"

The young scout turned, having recognized the voice of an old scout, named Sam Reynolds, under whose instructions he had ever made the most rapid progress in horsemanship and general border-craft.

"I know what you say, Sam," the youth replied. "It is true. But Ranger is a match for any of the Comanche horses, and I have considerable faith in my own abilities."

"Yer right thar. You've been a mighty good scholar, I'll say for ye. But, you've no idee what a time you'll be likely to hev gittin' to Austin. Tell ye what, my boy: I'll give ye a new rifle to take yer place."

"What! To go to Austin in my stead?"

"Yis, my boy, I'll dew it. I'll give ye the best rifle what kin be skeert up."

"Why, Sam, if I dreaded the trip ever so much I wouldn't let an old man like you take my place. But I'm determined to go, so that I will not be hired to stay at home on any conditions."

"But why not, my boy? Don't ye think I could make the trip as well as you? I've had quite as much to dew with the Injuns in my day as you."

"No doubt you would do quite as well as myself, perhaps better. But there is no use of arguing the matter. I have decided to go, and go I must."

"What d'ye suppose Miss Euphie would say, if ye should git knocked over by one of the pesky red-skins?"

Eleazar had been feeding and grooming his horse thus far through the conversation; but at this question, asked in low and significant tones, he ceased work, and turned quickly to his interlocutor. At first he seemed somewhat displeased, but in a moment was convinced that the speaker was in earnest.

"What do *you* suppose she would say?" he asked, after a momentary hesitation.

"I don't know. She might not *say* much, acuse ye know she hes sorter got hitched in with that Hobert feller. But I tell ye she would feel suthin' that no words could talk!"

"Do you think that?"

There was an eagerness in the tones of the speaker, showing how fully his heart was in the inquiry.

"No, I ain't one o' the kind 'at thinks a

big lot, and knows nothin'. I know what I tell a feller, 'most allers."

Eleazar gazed upon the veteran scout for some time, making no audible comment; but as he turned away, Sam heard him mutter:

"Then let the Indians kill me. The sooner the better!"

"What d'ye want tew talk like that for?" the old man asked, following his younger companion. "A feller'd think ye was dead in love, and had jest got sacked, the wust kind, to hear ye let on."

"I haven't got the sack yet," was the quick reply, "and, thank fortune, I'll be careful enough to keep from that humiliation."

"Then you own up that ye're in love with the gal?"

There was a kindness in the tones of the old man, which Eleazar could not resist. He had known the old scout for many years and understood his worthiness. Throwing himself upon a pile of hay, while Sam sat beside him, the young man said,

"I may as well confess it all, for I see that you have read me. The truth is, you are right; though I never have confessed it to any man before. I have loved Euphemia ever since she came to the settlement. 'Tis no boy's passion, either, for that would have died out before this. I wish I was well rid of it."

"What d'ye want to wish so for? You've jest as good a right tew love the gal as any body, and better tew, as one may say. Ye'll want a wife purty soon, and that's no gal that would be better fitted for ye than Euphie. So, why don't ye pitch in, and let her understand that you are an interested party?"

"I wouldn't hesitate, Sam, if it wasn't for Erastus. He's a good fellow, and she loves him better than she does me. 'Tis said they are engaged, and most likely 'tis so. I can't feel low enough to try any such underhand game; I wouldn't, if I knew I could succeed. She loves him, and he loves her. I've no right to make either one or both of them miserable, just to suit my own selfish feelings."

"Pshaw! You talk well enough, Le, but you don't look at it in the right light. Hobert don't think any more of the gal than you. You've jest the same right to try and git her that he has, till the day she is married; sartin till ye know sure that she is engaged tew him. Go right to the gal, and tell her jest how ye feel. Ten to one you'll be glad in the long run."

The young man was silent for a few moments, and then he said, very decidedly,

"No, Sam; I'm obliged to you for the advice, but I'm not going to Euphemia with any silly stories. Not now, at least," he added, modifying his tone. "This ride has first to be attended to, and when that is over with, there'll be time for something else. Let me see; I must lay in a good supply of ammunition. Come to the house with me, Sam."

They left the barn, and in a few moments encountered the object of their conversation, coming straight toward them. A flush

overspread Eleazar's face, and he would have passed her in silence had not the maiden addressed him.

"So they tell me you are going on that fearful ride, too," she remarked, with eyes half-filled with tears. "Oh, it seems so very dreadful!"

The old scout gave his companion's arm a quick pinch, and turned in another direction. Eleazar knew very well what he meant, but could not bring himself to the utterance of the many sentences which rushed through his brain.

"Oh, the ride will not be very long or very dangerous," he said, in a careless manner. "I have a good horse, and a worthy companion; so that I shall not be dependent upon myself alone."

"But it is such a long way, and the Indians sweep over these plains so!"

"Never mind. With good luck to-night's sun shall see us half-way to Austin, or more; and early on the next morning we will be on our way back. So don't feel a bit of fear that he'll not be back all right!"

With these words Eleazar passed on, and entered the dwelling which served as his temporary home. Euphemia turned slowly from the spot, and walked toward the house of her guardian. She soon became conscious of a presence, and upon looking up, saw the veteran scout who had so recently parted company with Roberts, walking near her.

She hastened to greet him, for the kind-hearted old man was a favorite with all who knew him.

"These are sad times," she said, wiping away a tear. "I do dread so much to have those two young men go away on such a desperate errand!"

"It's tew bad," said Sam, with a sympathizing voice. "I jest offered to give Le a good rifle if he'd let me take his place; but he is bound to go, and seems rather to fancy gittin' killed of the two."

"I noticed that he seemed strange to-day," returned the maiden. "I did not think any thing of it, for I fancied the excitement of such a journey would be enough to illustrate any one."

"It ain't that, Miss Euphie," said the old scout, shaking his head. "The poor feller's heart ain't right. He's dead in love with a gal in this place, and thinks he's no right tew let the cat out. So he wishes the Injuns'd kill him, to set him right in the matter! Strange, ain't it?"

"Very, very strange. I never should have dreamed such a thing. But he should remember that a 'faint heart never won a fair lady!"

"So I told him. I talked with him the best I knew how; but it didn't seem to make any difference with him. I'm sorry that he's so sensitive like. I'm afraid he'll feel like that sometime, and throw himself away."

"Do you think it possible?"

There was an intense earnestness in the tones of Euphie as she asked the question, which seemed to gratify the old scout amazingly. But he gave no expression of such feeling, save for a moment, and then he replied, with a solemn shake of the head:

"I wouldn't tell you so onless I felt purty sartin of what I was sayin'. Ye see the trouble is, the boy's as timid as a gal, and a plaguy sight more, when he's with you women-folks. But then that ain't all the trouble. Thar's another feller what Le fancies stan's a smarter chance nor hisself, and he won't say any thing to raise any trouble in camp. He seems to have a sort of feelin' that he'll git picked off afore all this fightin' around here's over, and I know thar's times when he don't jest feel sorry either. He told me jest now that the best thing what could happen tew him was for some red-skin tew knock him over."

While conversing thus, they had reached the maiden's dwelling-place, and here they halted. Perhaps something in the words or manner of the speaker had convinced Euphemia of what was to come; or it may be that her own heart told her. She paused a moment, bit her lip, and colored somewhat. Then she asked, in something of a hasty manner:

"You haven't told me who the girl is that is creating all this disturbance. Why don't you tell me the whole story?"

"Wal, I didn't know as you'd keer about that. On the whole, I guess I'd better be goin', 'cause I've got a leetle job on hand myself, that I can't put off."

"But you must tell me this," said Euphemia, starting after him. "It is not just to leave me in doubt. Do you mean that *I* am the one?"

"Wal, you've guessed square on the mark. You *are* the gal, Miss Euphie!"

The maiden's countenance drooped in a moment, and for some time she did not reply. Sam, meantime, stood by, regarding the play of her features closely. At first she turned away with a heavy step toward her own door, and then came back to the old hunter.

"They haven't gone yet?" she said, rather inquiringly than affirmatively.

The old man did not speak, but took the maiden by the arm, and pointed away to where two horsemen were riding abreast, out upon the plain. At the distance which intervened, it was difficult to distinguish persons, but Euphemia felt certain that they were none other than Erastus and Eleazar. And it might be that one or both of them was vanishing from her sight for ever!

With a sad countenance, she turned from the side of old Sam, and entered the house. There she sought the apartment occupied by Cordelia, and mused and wept over what she had learned.

"Never mind," said Sam Reynolds, with a sagacious shake of the head, as he hastened away from the place; "I've jest sot the gal a-thinkin', and if suthin' don't work around when that boy gits back here ag'in, then I ain't any judge. This ain't jest my kind of biz'ness; but then, as Jack Stiff used to say (and he wa'n't worth a kernil of powder for any thing), I kin turn my hand tew a'most any sort o' work, and dew it. Yis, Le, poor boy, ye must keep yer brains safe, though it's a mighty bad place ye're goin' intew to do it."

And as he spoke, the veteran hunter turned a lingering glance at the two forms, dis-

appearing over the undulating prairie to the southwest.

CHAPTER VI.

The Desperate Mission.

ALMOST at the same moment, the young men who had undertaken to share the perils of a rough ride to Austin, brought their horses to the doors from which they were respectively to set out. And when Eleazar mounted his shining black steed, fully prepared for the dangerous journey, Erastus leaped into his saddle. They met in the road which ran through their village and bore away to Austin, scarcely more than a mere trail after it cleared the skirts of the settlement.

Each gazed quickly into the face of the other, and each saw there the very expression which sat upon his own features. Both were determined, but neither perfectly assured.

"We are in for it," said Eleazar with a smile.

"So we are; though what we are in for is more than I can make out. I suppose we must take what comes."

"If it suits us," replied Roberts. "If not, we'll try and see if our wits won't show some way to get out of it."

"Well, you are cheerful, so I apprehend you do not fear any great danger."

"I can't say that I do. Do you?"

"Not much. Though I wouldn't be one bit surprised if we had trouble before we get through."

"That we shall, if any of the Indians saw us leave, or if we should fall in with any of them. But we hardly need fear them. Few horses in the State can outrun ours, and, with our weapons, it would scarcely be safe for a few to meddle with us."

"That's true, provided, of course, we could get them all *behind* us. If they should be on three or four sides of us, the case would be different."

"Rest easy, Erastus. There is no probability that such will be the case. I should sooner fear an ambush."

"Well, we'll not fear any thing," said Hobert, with an effort. "There are things enough that *may* happen; but it is all *chance*. I suppose you've made up your mind how we're to go?"

"Not in particular. We'll talk that over as we ride. What we both think best shall be our law, for the matter is left to our own choice."

"To *your* choice, not mine," said Hobert, frankly. "I'm goin' with you, or where you say; but I've no business sayin' what route, or any thing of the kind. Your judgment is best in such matters, and what you say, I'll be ready to do."

"But two heads are better than one—" Eleazar began.

"Not always. They ain't in this case; and so I tell you, once for all, that you are to lead or order, and I will obey."

"Well, we'll not quarrel over the rank, when it is likely neither of us will have occasion to give any orders. We've nothing

to do but ride together, and take care of ourselves."

"Don't flatter yourself too much," said Erastus, and there the topic was left.

After riding some five miles, they reached a low range of hills, or "mountains" as they were called in the vicinity, through which was a sort of pass or gap. As this saved a tedious ascent and descent, it was used by all persons having occasion to pass that range, near the place. To reach it required something of deviation, since the place of their destination lay east-north-east from Cedarville, and the pass was almost south-east.

As they came within long rifle-shot of the place, Ranger sniffed the air once or twice, and cast a searching glance ahead, which seemed almost to partake of human intelligence.

"What is it, my good Ranger?" said his rider, patting his neck. "Do you smell Indians? I hope not. We've no wish to make their acquaintance the first half-hour out."

The young man seemed a trifle startled at the unusual movement of the horse, but as a strict scrutiny failed to reveal any signs of the presence of either friends or foes, they dismissed all unwanted caution, merely keeping a look-out upon all sides for any appearance of the half-expected red-men.

Just as they had entered the pass, and very naturally relaxed all vigil, there came the loud report of a musket from the cliff which rose upon the northern side, and a bullet went hissing on its mission, passing so close to Eleazar's head, that he half fancied himself struck.

Both the young men started, although their movements were very different. Eleazar put spurs to his horse, hastily drawing a pistol as he dashed away through the gap; while Erastus came to a stand-still and unslung his rifle at the first movement.

He was looking for some traces of the coward who had fired the shot, though looking in vain.

The puff of smoke had risen from a cluster of bushes, in the most inaccessible part of the cliff, but it was evident that the marksman had gone. No sound could be heard to indicate what course the fleeing villain had taken.

As he lowered his weapon, and raised his bridle-rein again, Eleazar came rapidly galloping back.

"Are you hurt, Erastus?" he asked, upon coming within speaking distance.

"Not a bit," was the cheery reply. "I was just tryin' to git sight of that cowardly sneak."

"Rather a bad business," said Eleazar, with a shake of the head. "If there had been any more of them, you'd been apt to receive their compliments."

"Yes, I suppose I would," said Erastus. "But, since he was alone, it proved just as well in the long run. I don't know as I ought to have stopped, though," he added, more seriously.

"We shall do better not to try any fighting until we are forced to it," said Eleazar, with a half-smile. "Not but that I should

be glad to see such rascally cowards punished, but we must not risk our own lives to do it. Our errand is to get help, and not to hurt Indians."

"I see," said Erastus, frankly. "I am corrected, and I'll see in future that I try heels instead of facing. But I did want to get a shot at the plaguy rascal so bad that I didn't realize what I was doin'."

"All just as well, Erastus. But what do you suppose it was? Who fired that gun?"

"O, I suppose it must have been an Indian; nobody of our own color would have been guilty of such an act."

"But savages don't go around in that way, poppin' at a fellow. There's generally a whole pack of them, and all blaze away at once. No, Erastus, that wasn't Indian style."

"Then what could it have been? I can't guess."

"Nor I."

The two young men pondered for a few moments, and then Hobert repeated,

"I can't understand that. The more I think it over the more I don't see who or what it could have been."

"Did you never think that we might have a traitor among us?" asked Eleazar, with a sly look.

"By jing—!" the speaker cut short his exclamation, but continued; "you have guessed it, Eleazar! True as gospel. That's just the thing. But who can it be?"

"Don't ask me that, for I don't know. If I have any suspicions they may not be correct, and so I'll not breathe them. We'll keep a sharp look-out, and if any such thing is in the wind we shall learn more of it, sooner or later."

They rode onward, over a wide stretch which was generally called by the inhabitants, and designated upon some maps, as "mountainous." But the greatest elevation would be considered a medium-sized hill in New England, and the most of the region was only rolling to a moderate degree, and covered with a more general sprinkling of forest than Texas usually boasted in that portion of the state.

While there was more opportunity to mislead a foe, and escape him by strategy in this case than there would be upon the open prairie, there was also a greater probability that they would stumble upon him. Hence they were forced to proceed with the greater degree of caution, and consequently made less rapid progress.

They were approaching a large piece of wood, through which their way ran for some miles, when Eleazar pulled up his animal, exclaiming,

"See here, Erastus, I wonder if these parts ain't swarmin' with Comanches? Here's signs of 'em, if I'm any judge."

He leaped lightly upon the earth as he spoke, and ran his eye quickly over the soil before him. As we have remarked, the way was scarcely more than a trail, so that any considerable party, passing over, was certain to leave signs which an experienced hand would not be slow to detect.

"What is it, Le?" asked Hobert, drawing rein, but keeping his seat, and casting quick glances around.

"Comanches," was the quick and decided answer.

"How many?"

"I can't tell. You can see their tracks here, plenty as mosquitoes in July. They are going the same way as we, and they've but just gone, as you can see."

"Yes, their tracks are very plain," said Hobert, "and I fancy there is one of the rascals in that tree. See yonder, just beside that old cypress; but no matter. His head is gone, you can't see any thing more of him now."

"Are you certain that it is any livin' thing?"

"Yes, it is alive; and I am very certain it is an Indian, too."

He continued to gaze for a moment longer, and then added,

"There he goes, down out of sight. I guess we'd better be getting out of this, somehow."

"Yes, we'll ride back till we get to that other piece of woods, and strike off to the southward, through that. We will avoid them altogether, if possible."

He had remounted and turned his horse back toward the pass through which they had so recently come. It was with regret that they were forced to do so, since they had not calculated upon meeting any foe so soon, and to retrace their steps at the very outset argued ill for their final success.

But they had not long to indulge in gloomy thoughts, for they had scarcely commenced the retrograde movement, when a party of mounted Comanches appeared at the gentle rise a few miles short of the woodland.

The two white men kept on at a steady pace, but regarding the movements of the savages behind them meantime. The latter seemed at first undecided in what manner to proceed, whether to give the retreating settlers pursuit or otherwise. It was not till more than a half-dozen had gathered upon the crest that they began to ride forward, evidently to notice the effect upon the white men.

The latter did not seem at all alarmed at this state of affairs. Indeed, any evidence of such a feeling would have been the signal for a rush upon the part of the Comanches.

"They seem to have an idee of feelin' of us," said Erastus, a little uneasily.

In fact, he would have spurred on his horse at once, had he not pledged himself to follow the suggestions of Eleazar to the letter.

"Never mind them," said the latter, with perfect indifference. "If they get too near we'll face about and present our rifles. That'll bring matters to a head."

Without once turning in their saddles, the white men kept on, till they were half-way to the wood where they trusted to circumvent their wily foes.

By means of a small pocket-mirror which he carried, Eleazar was enabled to watch the movements of the Indians. He saw that they were making preparations for a sudden dash, and turned to his companion.

"Ready with your rifle," he said; "they are gettin' ready for a scrimmage. Now, halt here, and present, but do not fire unless I give the word."

The young men pulled up their horses where they were, turned them about quickly, and leveled their weapons upon the advancing Comanches.

The latter had begun to brandish their weapons, and were coming on at a sharp trot, preparatory to an energetic gallop. But, upon seeing the self-possessed and decided movements of those they had intended to attack, their warlike demonstrations ceased, and they came forward at a much slower pace, throwing themselves low upon the necks of their animals.

They seemed to expect an instant volley, from the manner in which they clung upon their horses' necks; but finding that it did not come, they seemed to comprehend the purpose of the whites. Others of the Indian party were coming up, and quick signals passed between them. The entire force then resolved itself into two bands, and while one division menaced the whites from the old standpoint, the others threw themselves upon their horses and began circling around the exposed twain.

"Come on," said Eleazar; "now is our time. Ride for the woods like mad. It's our only chance!"

They turned their horses as quickly as possible, and galloped toward the forest, now distant something like a mile.

The Indians saw what was the intention of their supposed victims, and at once pressed down upon three sides to cut off their escape. But they might as well have undertaken to stay the wind. Away went that shining black steed, with his lithe, graceful rider, bounding over the earth with speed like an antelope; while close behind him came the bulkier steed and heavier rider. Showers of the mellow earth went flying from the hoofs of the animals, as though in defiance of the dusky riders, who were straining every muscle of themselves and horses in the vain effort to overhaul the fugitives.

So close had been the chase, and so entirely did it absorb the powers of all concerned, that weapons were not thought of. There was no opportunity to use any thing save the arrows of the Comanches, and the white men were safe beyond the reach of the strongest Bowman.

Although the result of this bold movement was quickly decided, the red-men did not give over the pursuit. The leader of the party shouted a few words to his followers, and all spurred forward toward the woods, where the white men were already disappearing. They felt perfect confidence in their ability to overhaul the whites before they should reach Cedarville, whither they supposed them to be bound.

Very well did the Comanches understand their own skill in horsemanship, and the endurance of their animals had been tested too often to be doubted now. On a swift run they bore down upon and entered the forest, following the wagon-trail which led toward the settlement. None of them paused to examine it very thoroughly, since they certainly expected to come in sight of the fleeing settlers at every turn, and upon reaching each successive rise of ground.

Strangely enough, they reached the other side of the forest, and scanned the face of nature away to the gap, without seeing a

single sign of the fleeing horsemen. A quiet search revealed the fact that there was no such trail as they had fancied themselves following; consequently the white men had misled them.

With many wild and fearful shouts the baffled savages turned back, and spread themselves, to more effectually scour the forest through which they had just passed.

Of course the reader understands why the Indians failed to find any traces of the two daring riders.

Upon gaining the edge of the woods they were nearly or quite a quarter of a mile in advance of their pursuers, Eleazar being a trifle ahead of his companion.

To accomplish the young man's purpose it was necessary to leave the wagon-trail leading to Cedarville, strike sharp to the south, and following down a sort of valley, leading around to the eastward, to leave their enemies behind them, and try once more to make a straight line for Austin.

Eleazar realized very well that if the Comanches were some distance behind and following by trail alone, such a proceeding would involve much more of hazard than in the present case. Reasoning wisely, he concluded that the Indians would be so blinded by rage that they would dash along the straightest trail, without paying any particular attention to it. In this he was right.

Half way through the woods he knew of a place just suited to his wishes. If that could be gained he felt certain of throwing the Comanches off the track.

"Come on!" he shouted over his shoulder to Erastus.

"Never mind me; I'll be on hand," was the reply.

Down to the point which he had marked in his own mind Eleazar dashed and then he turned as short as possible.

"This way," he shouted again; and in a moment Hobert was following in his wake.

It was the lowest point in the forest, and over a bed of pebbles rolled a small, pure stream of water. Turning here, with the favoring influence of water and stones, it is easy to see that no trail was left which could be followed with any degree of certainty, unless the purpose of the white men was known.

True, they were obliged to slacken speed somewhat, but this was of little moment, since they were soon hidden from the view of the passing Comanches. In fact they had scarcely reached a place secure from observation, when they heard the rush of the savages as they dashed past.

"Good," exclaimed Erastus; "they've gone by and not suspected where we are. We are all right now."

"Don't be too certain," rejoined Eleazar. "They will be back in a few minutes, when they find that they have missed us. We must hurry all we can to get out of their way."

"But they can't trail us," muttered Hobert, "our horses don't leave a single hoof-mark."

"True; but they'll suspicion the place at once, because they'll see that no horse would leave a trail here."

They were not long in putting a good distance between themselves and the point of leaving the Cedarville trail. Hobert's heavier horse enabled him to keep pace with the utmost efforts of Ranger, and now that they were accustomed to the rough riding, they pushed forward with all speed.

"This way now," said Eleazar, as he finally reined his horse from the channel of the stream, and followed around a turn of the hill to the south-east. "We must leave the creek sooner or later, and this is the way we want to go."

"Just as well here as any where," answered Hobert. "If the red-skins find our trail they find it. I conclude we'll show them a tolerable clean set of heels, if they stay behind us."

But the young men heard nothing of any pursuers. On they went through the long stretches of forest, until at length the trees began to grow thinner and thinner in advance.

Approaching the margin of the woodland cautiously, to assure themselves that no Indians were in sight, they rode forth once more upon the open plain.

A few sweeping glances around satisfied Eleazar that his surmises had not been wrong. He glanced at the sun, now sinking in the west, and then over the scenery in front of them once more, saying as he did so,

"Yonder piece of woods is the place for us. If we can reach that we shall be able to ride five miles under cover. It can hardly be more than that distance there; so if these rascally red-skins ain't on our trail, we may give them the slip altogether."

But it was no trifling matter to ride miles away over that plain, exposed to view from all points. How slight a chance would be sufficient to change the whole aspect of affairs! Yet neither of the young men hesitated, as they urged their horses upon the wide prairie.

CHAPTER VII

A Speck on the Horizon.

It may be surmised that Eleazar and his companion lost no time in crossing the stretch of prairie before them. Yet they did not ride at a desperate pace, since the trial had been hard upon their horses already, and it was good policy to reserve a portion of their strength against an urgent call in the future.

Still they made ground rapidly, and more than half the distance had been passed. As yet there were no signs of any pursuers, and not a living thing had met their eye upon the plain before them. A low swell was just in advance of them, and after riding over it the young men observed with satisfaction that they were screened from the view of any party issuing from the woods they had left.

"Thank fortune, we can breathe for a minute," said Eleazar, drawing a long breath, as though to give expression to his sense of freedom. "On the whole we succeeded better with the Indians than I expected.

Since they have no particular cause for vengeance, they may conclude to give over the search for us, or let us go, altogether. If they do, and we meet no further adventures, we shall not lose so much time after all."

"There are several *if's* in the way," returned Hobert, laughing. "However, I hope we shall be in luck, for there's no knowing what a strait our friends may be in before we get back."

They rode on, talking of the past and present, their own situation and that of their friends. Both kept up a constant watch of all the region within their circuit of vision, allowing their noble animals to take their own time for the present.

Suddenly Hobert bent his eyes in an eastward direction, and regarded some object closely for a short time.

"See here, Le" he said, after a while, "what do you make out of that tall, straight thing loomin' up ag'in the sky yester?"

Eleazar followed the direction of his companion's finger, until his eyes rested upon a black speck against the horizon. He had not noticed it before, but after a short examination, returned:

"I guess that's nothing, Erastus. Just a broken stub or stump."

"No, it ain't any thing of the kind," was the decided rejoinder. "It has moved since I have been looking at it; so it's suthin' what's perseassed o' life."

"Is that a fact? Are you certain of it?" asked Eleazar, more in astonishment than doubt; and again his eyes were turned in the direction of the strange object.

But if it had seemed a stump before, it certainly looked more like one now. Only the fact that it had changed its position during the moment his eyes had wandered away, gave Eleazar proof that it was really an animate object.

"It is alive," he said. "It has moved since I first saw it. What do you make it out to be?"

"I'm sure I can't say. It may be—it must be, some person; whether Indian or white man I can not surely say. What else could it be?"

Eleazar shook his head slowly, as though to express some doubt which he might feel in his own mind, but he said nothing. He was busily engaged in watching the strange figure, hoping to solve the mystery of its nature. But there it stood, a mere black speck against the eastern sky. No efforts of vision could bring it nearer, or solve the problem of its identity.

Suddenly it disappeared from view, having, to all appearance, sunk into the earth. The young men uttered sighs of relief, and glanced at each other.

"You were right," said Eleazar, in answer to the inquiring look of his comrade. "It was somebody, and most likely an Indian. Yet I doubt much if he saw us."

"How so?"

"We are between him and the sun, which is so low that I fancy he would be troubled to see us."

Hobert looked around, as though startled by his companion's words. Seeing that the luminary of day had really sunk so far, he exclaimed:

"Is it possible that the day is so near gone, and so little accomplished?"

"Hasn't it been long enough since night came on yesterday?" asked Eleazar, with a melancholy smile.

"Yes, long enough for a lifetime! And so it has been since daybreak this morning. But, for all that, I hoped we should get further on our way before dark."

"We shall have time to make a few more miles. I think we had better camp before we get through those woods, as our horses will be better protected than in the open prairie."

"Will you go through the woods?" asked Hobert. "That Indian was near the edge, and it may be he intends camping somewhere in the brush, with a lot of his bloody-minded fellows."

"Possibly. But we will have no fears upon that point. These woods are large enough for us both, and if we keep pretty well to the right I don't fancy we shall have any trouble with them."

They bore away to the south somewhat more than had been their intention before the speck upon the horizon had been seen, and once within the borders of the wood, they paused for a short time.

A little stream was flowing there, whose cool waters were most grateful to both man and beast. After both had quenched their thirst, Hobert remarked:

"I'm goin' up this tree, and see how things look. I can see the Comanches from the top branches, if they are out of those woods where we giv' em the slip."

He ascended the tree in question, and took a deliberate survey of the land before him. Away over the plains he could see the gap through which they had passed, and most of the country nearer was exposed to his view. But he was more than gratified at finding no Indians within sight. Sliding to the earth, he reported his observations.

"As I suspected," said Eleazar. "They could not find our trail, or they gave over the chase. We'll not trouble 'em to know which."

They mounted and rode forward again through the forest, mile after mile. Finally the duskiness of evening began to descend, and Eleazar remarked:

"We can't see much longer. Perhaps we had better pick out a campin' spot where we be. Tain't above a mile to the plain, on the other side, so we hadn't better go much nearer, if we intend to stay here in the woods."

"Suit yourself, Roberts," said Erastus, "and I'll find no fault. I only wish we could make the whole journey without stopping."

As this was quite impossible, they proceeded to select a place for passing the night. They were not long in fixing upon what seemed especially adapted to their needs. There was a little valley, through which flowed the same stream of water which they had crossed upon entering the forest.

There were bunches of grass along the borders of the stream, which the hungry animals were allowed to feed upon for a time, while the riders chewed away upon

the well-dried meat which they had taken as their only provisions.

When darkness began to thicken over the scene, however, the animals were secured to two saplings, while the men rolled themselves in their blankets beneath a huge tree which grew there.

Exhausted as they had been by the scenes of the past thirty-six hours, it was little wonder that both of them fell into a sound sleep almost in a moment.

To Eleazar, time was utterly annihilated. How long he had slept he knew not. All at once he was aroused by something cold being pressed upon his cheek. Startled, as he well might be, he sprung upright before he fully realized that his most politic course might be the very reverse of that.

He was somewhat reassured by finding that the cold object was no more or less than Ranger's nose, which had been rubbed against his face. He began to address the beast in low tones, when he became aware that midnight silence did not brood over the entire forest.

Not many rods distant, and coming full toward him, he heard the irregular tread of a number of horses; while the jingle of arms, which fell upon his ears once or twice, convinced him that they were not without riders. Sensible of the danger of their situation, he hastened to arouse his still sleeping companion.

"Hist!" he exclaimed, bending over, and shaking the prostrate form. "Wake up, Erastus!"

The person addressed began to groan heavily, at first, but a second and severer shaking brought him to a realization of his position.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Get up, the Indians are close upon us," said Eleazar.

Erastus rose to his feet very quietly, and a moment's listening convinced him that such was but too truly the case.

"What'll we do?" he asked.

Since his awakening, Eleazar's active mind canvassed the situation as thoroughly as possible. It would be very easy for them to creep away and escape the cunning savages, personally, but to leave their horses for the Indians was not to be thought of. The best they could hope to do in that case would be to reach Cedarville again, having failed utterly in their attempts to bring the desired aid. Such being the case, all efforts must be directed to retaining possession of their steeds.

As Eleazar did not reply at the moment, Erastus repeated his question,

"What shall we do?"

"Wrap yourself in your blanket, Indian-fashion, get on to your horse, and be lettin' him drink from the creek."

It required but a moment to accomplish this, and by the time it was done the Indians were passing upon both sides of them

"Let them go on and leave us if they will," muttered Eleazar, in tones which none but his companion could hear. "If they go to making a fuss, we must try our pistols, and make a run of it. We'll keep together if we can, and if not, we'll look out for ourselves. If we should get sepa-

rated we must get to Austin the best way we can. If I should fall, there is no word I wish to send. My business is all settled up."

"And so is mine."

They could say no more, for while these mumbled sentences had passed between them, several of the Indians had ridden down beside the partially-disguised white men, and were allowing their horses to drink. One or two of the nearest gave sharp glances of suspicion at their neighbors, but they seemed to take the presence of the strangers as a matter of course, and continued talking to each other, and attending to their horses.

Both of the young men looked around upon the Comanches, with feelings the reverse of pleasurable. There were fully twenty of them, all armed in their barbarous manner, and painted most hideously. All seemed to have halted. While a part of them were watering their horses at the stream, the balance were scattered about in the forest near by.

The two young men were decidedly uneasy. Surrounded as they then were, a discovery would be the signal for instant massacre. Watching his opportunity, Eleazar turned his animal away from the creek, riding slowly in the direction where his dusky foes were the least in numbers. Erastus saw the movement and profited by it soon after.

For a moment it seemed they would be successful in leaving the presence of their enemies. It was so dark that but a few feet of distance abolished all distinctions of color or race, and thus far no one had challenged the figures moving along so leisurely.

But at the very moment when Eleazar began to congratulate himself upon a lucky escape, and was looking around to see that his comrade was following, a huge Comanche directly across his path, and bending from his saddle, propounded some question to the young Anglo-Saxon in the barbarous dialect of the Comanches.

Greek or Hebrew would not have been less intelligible to Eleazar, since he had never made any attempts to master the native tongues. Of course he knew nothing in regard to the nature of the interrogation, but thinking it possible that a dumb answer would be sufficient to rid him of the Indian's presence, he partially turned in his saddle, and pointed to some object in the rear.

For a moment he fancied the ruse to have been successful. The Indian turned his horse, and rode a yard or two in the direction of the object pointed out. Yet a second thought seemed to obtrude itself, much to the annoyance of Eleazar. The savage rider bent back, and placing his face within a foot of the young settler's, gave utterance to another question, much more complicated in its nature than the first.

Here was a dilemma. Very evidently, pantomime would not answer in this case. He could not speak a word of the Indian tongue, or make any sounds which might be mistaken for it. Surely the moment of his detection had come. He was revolving in his mind all manner of expedients;

such as darting by the Comanche and running the chances in a dead race, when something which he was far from expecting changed the aspect of affairs in a moment. He heard rather than saw a single heavy blow, and the next instant the warrior's saddle was vacant.

Erastus had seen and comprehended the state of affairs. Riding up on the other side, he drew a heavy pistol which he carried, and dealt the brave a fearful blow with the iron-bound butt. Of course he toppled from the saddle and pitched to the ground, while Hobert seized his horse by the bridle,

"Come, Le," he whispered. "None of them noticed any thing. We'll take his horse along, so they won't find out so soon."

They rode directly into the wood, away from the Indian party, holding their breath in suspense, while expecting to hear a whoop of alarm at each moment. But they made some distance, and no sounds of any commotion reached their ears.

"We may as well cut loose from this horse now as ever," said Eleazar, taking the rude rein. "We've no use for him. Perhaps we'd better tie him to this shrub, and leave him for his tall rider."

Acting upon the suggestion, he quickly noosed the line about a sapling, and parted company with the superfluous horse.

"Now we must shape our faces toward the prairies as near as we can," he continued. "Wait a moment till I get the points."

He reflected for a few moments, and then changed his course a trifle.

"This is the way," he said, pointing in advance.

They had scarcely resumed progress, however, before there came to their ears sounds of a commotion in the direction of the Indians whom they had escaped.

"Ha! they smell a rat at last!" said Erastus. "Never mind, we are safe out of their way, and I'll be bound there isn't Indians enough this side the Rocky Mountains to find our trail in this dark night."

"They'll not be likely to find our trail," said Eleazar, "but may wind us in some other manner. We must make all possible speed, and run the chance of getting away."

Neither was disposed to lose any time, for they were entirely too near the spreading Comanches for safety. Keeping their horses in the direction chosen, they bent low to avoid the branches under which they often swept, bruised new and then by trees which the steeds had passed too near, and pressed toward the open prairie. That once gained they could use greater speed, with far less danger from natural causes than attended a midnight gallop through the forest.

"Never mind," said Eleazar, in reply to some half-vexed observation upon the part of his companion; "I think if it was light we should see the trees pretty thin before us. Keep up heart a few minutes, and we'll be out of the woods. We are makin' good progress."

He struck against a projecting limb, which nearly unseated him, as he ceased speaking; but not being severely hurt, was not long in getting firmly seated again.

Scarcely was this done when there came a sound, so full of omen that his heart

seemed to sink and then rise again, till it came quite near the base of his throat; so near, in fact, that he swallowed several times before getting in speaking order.

The sound was nothing more or less than the report of a gun, not far away. Not far in advance of them the bullet went whistling through the tree-tops. A chorus of yells from different parts of the forest answered the shot, showing it to have been a signal that the course of the fleeing whites had been discovered.

"So, they're after us," said Erastus.

"Let them come. 'Tis not far to the plain, I'm confident, and once there I'll defy them to follow us. Ranger is a sure-footed horse, and yours was never known to stumble, so I think we need fear nothing in that respect."

Confidently as he had spoken of leaving the forest, it seemed to Eleazar that the trees thickened about them, while under-brush began to prevail, so as to retard their progress at times. All the while they were conscious that blood-thirsty foes were gathering in their rear—gaining rapidly upon them, for aught they knew to the contrary.

Oh, for a moment's light; or a few miles of open prairie! But neither seemed vouch-safed at the needed moment.

There was no denying the fact. Nearer and nearer at each moment sounded the pursuit. A few minutes more and they would be overtaken. Could it be that their horses, the vaunted Ranger and Hobert's scarcely less distinguished steed, were being so utterly distanced by the Comanche animals?

No, as the sounds came nearer the fugitives discovered that their foes were coming down upon their flank. Confident that this must be a fresh body, the riders changed their course somewhat, and bent low to avoid the shots which were occasionally fired at them by some of the pursuers.

A mass of branches and running vines lay in the way of the fugitives, but the first intimation they had of such a fact was the finding their horses utterly entangled amid them. To push forward was impossible, and they were forced to back out, and seek some other path. It was a most decidedly unpleasant thing to do, in the face of such a close pursuit, but it was done, and that before the savages had overtaken the almost disheartened riders.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Comanche.

But the mere fact of extrication from the nest of brambles, was not equivalent to getting out of the woods, by any means.

On attempting to pass around the obstruction, it was found to extend before them like a heavy wall. There was but one way in which they could proceed. Upon the right of them was the bramble-hedge; behind and upon the left the pressing Comanches.

Yard after yard was passed, a foot seeming a furlong in the estimation of the anxious white men. Still that mass of impenetrability, curving inward more and more, forcing them back toward the searching Indians.

All at once Eleazar heard the movement of horsemen in advance of them, blocking up their pathway.

"They are in there; we are surrounded!" he whispered to Erastus.

"Then we must charge them!" said the latter, decided.

"Yes, we must," returned the first speaker. "But we'll strike this way, and may not meet them."

He indicated a course at an oblique angle to the one they had been pursuing. Grasping their revolvers, they urged their horses forward in the direction selected.

There came a wild cry from behind, followed by a fierce yell in front of them. Their horses recoiled before this savage whoop, but were quickly urged forward to their duty.

The dark forms of their foes began to be distinguishable amid the trees and gloom. Hobert's revolver cracked out the opening of the conflict, which was as sharp as it was short. A flight of missiles from the Comanches answered the shots, and Eleazar saw his companion disappear in the smoke and darkness.

In a moment his own pistol was joining its voice in the chorus of destruction. Twice or thrice he fired, and then, in raising his head to get a better aim, he was caught beneath the chin by a strong limb, and thrown to the earth. In his descent an arm came violently in contact with some hard substance, and was temporarily disabled, while the pistol was knocked from his hand.

Though somewhat confused by the shock, Eleazar did not for a moment lose his consciousness. He was impressed with the necessity of instant action if he would save his life. In a moment he had gained his feet; just in time to rush into the embraces of a tall savage, who with brandished tomahawk had sprung from his horse to give him a finishing blow. A struggle ensued, the Comanche getting the better of Eleazar in his disabled condition, though he did not use his tomahawk when he had opportunity. This forbearance might have surprised the young scout had he been in a condition to notice it, which he was not. He was only aware of being borne down in the midst of a great tumult, while not over-gentle hands relieved him of his weapons, as well as every thing which a savage's fancy could select in the dark. He was the recipient of cuffs and blows, but strangely enough no wound was inflicted. He was lashed upon his own horse, some of his captors took the animal by the bridle, and he was led back to the very place where himself and Hobert had been so soundly sleeping a short time before.

Here the Indians had built a fire, stationed guards, and seemed in the act of composing themselves to a quiet rest for the balance of the night. The prisoner, when brought into the firelight, attracted much attention, and considerable discussion among the hideous captors. Nor was the coal-black animal he bestrode less an object of curiosity and criticism. Many of the Comanches present had seen the wonderful speed and endurance of the horse, and discussed his merits among themselves with all the gusto of a party of civilized jockeys.

After a time the captive was released from his uncomfortable position, and allowed to sit upon the ground beside his keepers.

For some time most of the savages sat in council, and thus the prisoner was able to judge quite definitely as to their force, and also to gather something in regard to their intentions. There were thirty gathered about the fire—just thirty, as he assured himself by actual count. All of them were warriors, trained and schooled to exposure and endurance. Yet he saw that they were composed of three different parties, under as many independent leaders.

The object of their council did not seem to be so much himself, as an intended attack upon some settlement. In the matter of choice there seemed to be some diversity of opinions, and for an hour no agreement was effected.

At last the matter seemed to be decided. The Comanches threw themselves upon the bare earth, such as had blankets rolling themselves therein, and sought the rest their worn frames demanded.

Eleazar was about following their example; had, in fact, reclined upon an elbow for some time, when the same tall Indian who had captured him grasped his arm, and dragged him to an upright position. His back was then placed against a small tree, and strong cords of deerskin employed to lash him thereto. This was done in a manner not really painful at the moment, but so effectually as to preclude the possibility of any movement upon his part. In case he was obliged to stand long in this position it must become fearfully distressing.

A sleepy, idiotic-looking savage was then led up, and the chief, for such he was, of one squad, gave him a stern command in his native tongue, to the effect that his own life should pay for any remissness on his part by which the prisoner escaped.

Such a charge would seem the height of folly in itself, to any one looking upon the scene at that moment, but the warrior seemed duly impressed with the importance of his charge, and walked back and forth flourishing his tomahawk in the most consequential manner imaginable.

Keeping within a yard of his charge, and maintaining the utmost vigilance as the minutes wore away, the guard allowed no thought save his duty to enter his brain, while the most tardy of the Comanches sunk to sleep.

As he paced back and forth, Eleazar followed his movements with his eye, though his thoughts were upon other things. First, of course, came the query in regard to his own fate. Why was he thus reserved, when the practice of making prisoners was almost unknown among the wild tribe who were holding him? He could think of many things as being quite possible, but none of them seemed more probable than the others, so that he could arrive at no solution of the problem which seemed likely to be correct.

Of escape, and of course the thought came to him, he could see no possibility at present, so he dropped it as utterly as possible. True, the thought would come back, very frequently, as though to tantalize the

young man, while the grim sentinel was pacing within a yard of him with brandished weapons.

But another question, which gave the young man no small amount of solicitude, while the answer seemed quite certain, was, What had become of his companion? The frank, noble, whole-souled Erastus. Where was he? And, from some unseen source, came the answer, "Dead!"

That such was the fact, Eleazar scarcely doubted. There was a faint chance that he had succeeded in breaking through the Indian forces, and was now on his way to Austin; but this seemed next to impossible. Tears fell from the young man's eyes, tears which did no discredit to his brave manhood, as he realized how probable it was that his companion had been slain. He had known Erastus Hobert a long time, and known only to love him. The fact of his being a rival suitor for the hand of Euphemia Vincent, and a more favored one than himself, did not once occur to the young man's mind. True, he pictured to himself something of the dismay and sorrow which would rend the lovely maiden's heart upon learning the tidings, if ever the news reached her; but never a single selfish thought had dwelling in his heart. He would tell her how nobly and bravely Erastus had fallen, with his face to the foe—true and worthy her love, even at the moment of his death.

It was not so plain in what manner he would reach the maiden, to impart the desired information; in fact he did not realize, while his thoughts ran thus, how closely he was bound to the unyielding sapling. The movements of his guard finally drew the captive's attention to himself again.

The sentry paced resolutely back and forth, keeping unceasing watch of his charge till satisfied that his chief and all about him were wrapped in slumber. Then he felt of the ligatures which held the prisoner—the fire having died away so that he could not see—and after assuring himself that all was right, placed his back against a tree at a little distance, keeping his vision upon the white man, or the place where he was last seen, since it was so dark that two or three feet of space obliterated all outlines and distinctness.

Now it was that the thought occurred to Eleazar whether he might not release himself in some manner. His position had long since become painful, and now a sort of numbness seemed pervading his frame. Well he knew that any efforts to help himself must be made soon, or abandoned for the night—about equivalent to saying "for ever."

Gradually he began to work his uninjured arm, drawing upon it, and turning from side to side, as much as possible. After a long effort he was forced to the conclusion that said arm was too securely fastened for any efforts on his part to effect its freedom.

Not utterly disheartened, he proceeded to try each limb in order, making desperate exertions, from which he desisted only at the approach of his guard.

The latter seemed to have his suspicions aroused, for he walked deliberately up to Eleazar, and ran his fingers over the cords

which held him. Apparently satisfied that all was right, he bestowed a hearty cuff upon the captive, and turned away.

He had been gone but a few moments when Eleazar was conscious of a strange feeling in his nether limbs. There was a sort of cool relief, a sense of returning feeling which he had not expected.

The mystery was soon explained. Almost involuntarily he moved a foot, and was doubly startled and gratified to find that he was free! The bonds which held his feet had been cut. Of course it was the work of his guard, since no other person had been near him. But what could be the Indian's object? Was there really a spark of humanity in his composition, notwithstanding his unprepossessing exterior?

With senses doubly alive, Eleazar watched for his return, and very soon he came, sauntering by the prisoner so near that another fact was revealed. This was not the guard who had been set at first, but one totally unlike him in every respect! What did it mean?

As he passed the tree, Eleazar felt another of the cords loosen, and another thrill of relief passed over his frame. But one now held him in that uncomfortable position, and this he felt would be loosened very soon.

Again the sentry drew near, with the same careless pace, assuring himself that his charge was perfectly safe, as he passed within a foot of his face. Really excited now, for the first time since his capture, Eleazar waited for the loosening of the last ligature, nor did he wait in vain. It loosened and dropped off. He stood leaning against the tree, free from all bodily restraints.

Before he realized that deliverance was at hand, or really trusted himself to think as much, his hand was taken, and something cold thrust into it. Upon examination it proved to be the haft of a knife, strong and heavy. Scarcely had he grasped that when a hatchet was placed in the other, and his Comanche friend grasped him by the arm, leading the way very gently toward the creek.

Along the banks of the stream the Indians had secured their animals, and they were soon in the midst of the sleepy brutes.

"Who are you?" Eleazar ventured to whisper, very cautiously.

The fierce grasp upon his arm, which almost caused him to cry out, convinced him that silence would be his best policy until they had gained safer ground.

Creeping along under the noses of the animals, they soon reached one which Eleazar recognized as his own favorite Ranger, notwithstanding the darkness.

At a signal from his companion he leaped into the saddle, which had not been removed, while his conductor gained the back of another, standing beside him. Then a quick cut from the Indian's knife severed the halters, and they rode from the spot with all possible care.

They crossed the creek at a convenient place, and followed down the opposite bank. For some distance they moved very slowly, lest any clatter of feet should betray their

escape to the easily-awakened Comanches above.

At length, however, they started into a brisker pace, and then it was that Eleazar began to feel some curiosity in regard to his strange friend. Up to this time he had been too deeply engrossed in the problem of escape to think a great deal of the means by which it was being effected. Now his curiosity began to be aroused. What possible interest could an Indian, and a Comanche, have in thus assisting him away? He could get at no solution of the mystery, and resolved to make another appeal to the person in question.

"For heaven's sake, who are you?" he asked, in low and careful tones.

The Indian uttered a series of gutturals which fairly startled the young man. If he had felt any particular convictions in the matter they were dispelled as with a breath.

"Now if ye know who I be keep yer mouth shet till we git to some safer place!"

"Sam Reynolds, as I live!" exclaimed the youth, in subdued tones of wild surprise.

"Keep yer mouth shet!" repeated the veteran scout; for it was no other than he.

It cost the bewildered Eleazar an effort to obey his friend's injunction. That old Sam Reynolds was really riding beside him, he did not for a moment doubt. His ears had convinced him that such was the fact. But how he came there, in the midst of deadly foes, disguised as one of their number, and effecting so daring a release of a captive from their very midst, he did not at all understand. He knew the old hunter was reputed for daring and strategy, but that he should compass any thing partaking so much of the nature of a miracle seemed to border upon the verge of the supernatural.

There was no time to ask questions now, for they soon gained the margin of the forest. As the trees faded away and they rode forth upon the plains, Eleazar saw that dawn had already commenced. The dim outlines of the plain could be seen, while the forest they had left rose behind in gloomy relief.

"Ye must ride now," said Sam, as they left the forest. "If them rotted varmints hain't got wind of yer bein' gone yet, they will purty soon. We must git a start of 'em."

They set off at a brisk trot, reserving the best speed of their horses for a case of emergency.

"We must save the horses," said Sam, "cause they're about all we've got tew depend on. As tew fightin' implements, we've next tew none."

"Tell me one thing," said Eleazar, after a pause. "Do you know what has become of Erastus Hobert?"

"Poor feller," said Sam, in a different voice. "We never'll see him any more! The yaller-skinned heathen shot him full of arrers, and tore off his skulp. A cuss upon 'em, I say! But no man can say he wa'n't game. He killed tew on his own hook, and I've sent one on arter him sence."

"The lives of three Comanches are little equivalent for such a man as Erastus," said Eleazar, dashing away a tear.

"True for ye," was the reply. "The whole tribe wouldn't pay for one such man as him. But it was suthin' that couldn't be helped."

"You are certain that he was killed, are you not?" Eleazar asked, with a shade of doubt. He hoped that such might not be the case, and that by some chance his friend was still living.

"Coorse I be," was the reply. "I seen him after he was dead and all cut to pieces. Ye see the poor boy knocked over a pair o' the painted critters, and it made 'em awful mad. But he was killed right out, so their abuse didn't hurt him any."

Both heaved a sigh, and after a short pause Eleazar asked:

"How in the world came you in the camp, and in that disguise? If I was superstitious I should think you had the power of witchcraft!"

"Oh, it was done easy enough," the veteran hunter replied. "You see, after I'd made you that good offer what ye wouldn't take, I thought tew myself, I'll go, any how. I went and told Cap'n Tompkins, fixed up my false head, and came on."

Here the old man placed one hand upon his head, and quietly removed the scalpmock, which materially altered the shape of his head, and gave him a much more civilized appearance.

"A little water'll take off this Injin color, he added, "when it's safe to be white men ag'n, and the cloze I'll wear a while till we see if thar's any more use for 'em."

"I found out about what way ye was goin'," he continued, resuming the thread of his story, "and kinder bore off and on, till arter dark. I'd jest found a place where I could bunk down, when the plaugy red-skins came along, and I had to be red-skin too. You see I know suthin' o' their language, and so I passed off purty well. I found they was on your track, and I was glad they'd come acrost me, 'cause I reckined I might be of some service. And I reckin I have, if we only have any kind o' luck now."

"But how did you get me away?" Eleazar asked. "You are not the guard that was set over me at first."

"No, that poor fool sat down and got sleepy, so that a little prick o' my knife in the back of his neck shut his eyes for a good long nap. Course I took notice that nobody was lookin', and when the feller had got quiet, I took his place so that nobody mistrusted the difference."

"I certainly did not, till I felt myself being cut loose," said Eleazar. "But don't you suppose they have found it out now?"

"Very likely. But we've got such a start that they needn't try tew catch us."

It was now quite daylight, and the rich gold which fringed the eastern horizon gave token that the sun was near its rising. The broad plain was smiling in all its natural beauty, and none would have dreamed, as they gazed upon the scene, that deadly peril lurked in many hideous forms upon the bosom of that sweet landscape.

"I think we've given 'em a final slip," said old Sam, after glancing back and seeing that none of the Indians were yet in

sight. "I'm glad of it, my boy. Off and on I've fit red-skins, and one thing and another of the kind, for fifty year, and now every time I git the best of 'em it does my old heart good. You see, I don't know but every time will be the last, and so I don't like tew fail in any thing I undertake of the kind. But tell me, my boy, did you see any thing of a sneakin' cuss hangin' around the 'gap' when ye come through?"

Eleazar started at the question, and quickly stated what had passed when they came down. He gave the conclusion at which they had jumped, and asked his companion if he knew any thing in regard to the would-be assassin.

"I know this much," returned Sam, shaking his head, "he'll never trouble any body more what passes through there. He played it once too much."

There was something in the old man's tone which seemed to convey more than his words. Eleazar ventured a question, but received no answer.

"Don't ask any thing about it, my boy. He wasn't there for any good purpose, and whatever happened to him was perfectly right. If ye should hear of any low feller what was missin', ye kin make up yer own mind as ye're a mind tew. But don't say any thing about what I've told ye."

Eleazar gave the required promise, and ney rode on, talking of such topics as the occasion naturally suggested. Sam had a small supply of food, and this was divided and eaten with a hearty relish. Both understood that it was all they could expect till they should reach friends, but that fact did not prevent their full enjoyment of the present supply.

They had ridden for some time in fancied security, scarcely looking behind them. But when they finally raised an elevated swell, habitual caution asserted its customs, and both riders cast hasty glances about. They were not a little startled at what they saw, and Sam remarked, with a disappointed air,

"By Tecumseh! If they ain't all a-comin'! We hain't got through with the painted faces yet, it seems."

Afar over the plains could be seen scattered bands of Indians, sweeping across the broad swells with a wild, mad vengeance. A faint cry seemed to come up from the distance, as if the Comanches had caught a fresh sight of their intended victims, which was evidently the case.

The faces of the two white men were full toward Austin, the place of their destination; but sixty miles of trackless prairie lay between, while two or three miles back came a score and a half of blood-thirsty pursuers. The prospect was not inviting, more especially when the fact is taken into consideration that one of the men had only a knife and hatchet in the line of weapons.

Not a moment was lost. Both spurred their horses into a mad run, which plainly called forth yells from the distant pursuers. Rapidly sped both parties, pursued and pursuers. Miles were as nothing in the fierce race. On, still on they flew, and when an hour had passed the race was kept up, with all the vigor which had marked its opening.

At length it became evident that a few of the fleetest mounted among the Comanches were gaining. The black steed, Ranger, despite the hard usage he had received, was capable of making still greater exertions; but not so with the animal Sam bestrode, and the thought of leaving his devoted old friend behind had never a dwelling-place in the young man's brain.

"Thank God, they begin to give it up," said Eleazar, glancing behind.

"I say *amen* to that!" returned the old hunter. "I'm gittin' a leetle trifle tired of this hard run. It's suthin' I ain't used tew. But I kin stand it as long as any Injin," he added, with a feeling of the old pride.

"Good for your spunk!" said Eleazar; "but I don't think they will keep it up much longer. Some of them 've fell off already."

"Then the rest 'll foller suit in a little while. I can stand it a good spell, yit."

But if some of the party had given over the pursuit, enough still remained actively engaged, to give the two white men a very poor show for reaching their place of destination. Eight or ten of those furthest in the rear had found that they could not be "in at the death;" even if their companions were successful, and had accordingly gathered upon a rise of ground to watch the progress of the chase. At least ten to one still held on in pursuit.

"Are we gaining any?" Sam asked, after a while.

His voice was anxious, and it was plain to be seen that the long race was telling upon him.

"No, they are nearer," said Eleazar, glancing back; "but another lot of them has fallen off, so that not more than ten are racing us now."

"Good," said the old scout. "They will fall off tew, purty soon. But how much they have gained!" he added, glancing back, a short time later.

CHAPTER IX.

Fact and Fancy.

The day and succeeding night passed over the heads of those remaining in Cedarville. Upon a busier scene the sun never shone. Even long after darkness had settled over the place did those engaged in the erection of a block-house persevere in their labors. Men, boys, and women, even, were there, aiding with might and main in the efforts for common safety.

And while they toiled Henry Vincent, with a picked band of followers, was scouting far away, to give the alarm should any force of Indians appear. But none seemed disposed to give them any trouble, and at nine o'clock the rude building was pronounced tenable.

The weak and defenseless ones at once entered it, while a strong picket force was thrown out, to give warning of any Indian strategy.

Another morning came, however, and all was quiet. Again the scouts went forth, and again was work resumed upon the fortifications. A strong line of palisades was set,

to keep intruders at a safe distance, and such other devices as ingenuity and experience could suggest were adopted.

These improvements, with the transfer of valuables to the new stronghold, occupied most of the day, so that night settled again upon a busy multitude.

Amid all the general din of preparation and bustle, one in Cedarville was silent, sad and almost idle. That one was Euphemia Vincent. People saw it, and spoke in low tones of the fact that Erastus had drawn the marked slip, and had gone forth in search of assistance. And when that fact was mentioned they really supposed that the whole matter was sifted. No one blamed the maiden that she felt sad; it was but natural, and showed her affection for the man to whom she was betrothed.

But the mass was partially in error, and wholly in the dark with regard to the state of the maiden's mind. The truth was, Sam Reynolds had awakened a train of thought in the maiden's mind, and great strife was being created in her heart.

She had known before that her presence was ever most agreeable to Eleazar Roberts, and had fancied that he might regard her with an affection reaching somewhat further than friendship—extending almost to the love of a brother. And there she allowed the matter to rest, believing that her holiest affections were given to Erastus Hobert. She had not paused to ask herself if such really was the case, and if she had done so it would have made no difference. She was not aware that another and deeper affection than any she had yet experienced could be aroused in her heart.

Now she found herself strangely distressed and perplexed. Erastus seemed to her as he ever had seemed—there was no change in her affection for him; yet did the idea of wedding him torture her fearfully. In her fancy's eye she saw the man who would even now prefer death to such a sight, writhing beneath the blow which should forever shroud his life in gloom. A dreadful horror convulsed her frame. Should her deliberate act thus hurl a loving fellow-mortal into the depths of despair! But her promise was already given to Erastus that she would become his bride at the proper time.

"Oh, that I could recall those words!" she moaned, pacing the narrow apartment. "That I could ask to be free again, and say to him—what? That my heart is not his?"

With one hand pressed upon her brow, she endeavored to reason calmly. Yet the very effort was mocked. As well strive to calm the wild tempest, and bring order out of chaos, as to infuse calm reason into her distracted brain.

In the night sleep came; but not as a balmy restorer. No sooner were her eyes closed than a pale, earnest pleading face appeared, and mild blue eyes beamed lovingly into her own.

Then she seemed to see that slight form afar over the plains, mangled, bleeding, dying. And a soft voice came to her, saying, "This is all for you, Euphie; but it is all for the best. I could not be happy and live without you."

And then, with wild surges of grief and remorse, not unmixed with pity, she would start to find that it was a dream. All a dream? she asked herself. No, for what Sam Reynolds had told her was stamped, yes, seared upon her brain, burning there yet, deeper and deeper.

No wonder that she woke on the morning of the day following their departure with aching head and saddened countenance. Oh, how she longed to hear something from those who had departed on the mission of peril! But, she knew very well that a long time must pass—long to her, as well as all the anxious ones about her—before the result of the mission would be known.

And so the long day and another night wore away, bringing no news to Cedarville of friend or foe. But the third morning dawned, dark and rainy. Some unknown force in the air about seemed to fill the hearts of the settlers with forebodings. Many predicted disaster, all wondered that no word reached them from Austin. They did not realize how short the time had been, long as it had seemed to them.

In fact their fears seemed in a fair way to be realized. Soon after daylight moving bands of Comanches were seen approaching from the eastward. One of the scouts was killed and others driven back nearer to the town.

Fear and consternation seized upon the inhabitants when the facts became known. A general rush to the block-house ensued, many families leaving their morning meal half eaten.

The most doleful rumors and surmises in regard to the fate of their friends filled each one's mouth. Since the savages came from the direction of Austin, they certainly had good reasons for their fears and surmises.

All during the long day did anxious eyes sweep the horizon, looking for the approach of deliverers, but looking in vain.

As the long hours passed away there were no signs of an attack from the Indians. Yet they remained in sight, gradually approaching the place, and giving evidence of an intention to attack early in the evening.

Hopeful, prayerful eyes watched for any signs of approaching assistance, but none came. And finally the shades of darkness began to fall, and the Comanches became all commotion. The dread hour was at hand. Outnumbered, and half despairing, the defenders gathered in desperate knots, determined to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

The evening wore on, and no severe fighting had yet taken place, though the savages were within half rifle shot of the block-house, skulking about like so many dark spirits of blackness.

But hark! What sounds are those? A volley, a wild cheer, and the unearthly rallying cry of the Indians. In an instant how was the aspect of affairs changed!

"Hurrah, boys!" shouted Captain Tompkins, dancing for joy. "They've come, they've come! there're fighting now. Come on and help 'em, boys! We'll show 'em better than to come here again!"

Rushing from the block-house with impetuous speed, followed by his men, now fired with his own ardor, the gallant Captain dashed upon the frightened and scattering Comanches.

Assailed upon both sides with such impetuosity, the savages fought, such time as they fought at all, under great disadvantages. Their braves went down like grass before the mower's scythe, and many who sought to escape fell before the pursuit made. The rout and defeat of the Comanches was complete. And what made the result all the more cheering to the defenders, was the fact that not a single man had been slain upon their side. A few had been wounded, but none fatally.

There was a happy scene of greeting between the citizens of Cedarville and the brave men from Austin who had ridden forth to succor their endangered neighbors. There were fifty of the latter, sturdy men every one, well mounted and armed to the teeth. Their onset, all unexpected to the Indians, had been like the sweep of a hurricane amid falling autumn leaves.

A few of them at once started off upon the trail of the fleeing savages, but in the exhausted state of their animals it was folly to attempt any settled pursuit. One or two of the rearmost were fired at, and then the victorious heroes returned.

But soon the men of Cedarville began to inquire where the brave ones were who had brought them deliverance. The party from Austin could only say that an old man and a young one had reached their town; that the former had been left behind, being too much exhausted by the trip out to return so soon; and that the young man had been wounded at the very commencement of the fight.

A search followed, and Eleazar was found in a slight hollow, which had escaped search, faint and gasping from the loss of blood. An Indian arrow had passed through his side, inflicting an ugly, though not necessarily dangerous, wound.

A number of gentle hands raised him from the earth, and very soon he was placed upon a comfortable couch, and his wound dressed.

"Who's killed or hurt?" asked Euphemia, as Cordelia Tompkins entered her presence.

The fearfully pallid features of the speaker gave evidence of the terrible trial through which she had been, and was now, passing. Several times she had attempted to go forth and learn for herself, but as often was she restrained by some indefinable fear.

"Oh, I don't know. Eleazar is dreadfully wounded, and two or three of the men from Austin."

"Eleazar Roberts isn't wounded?" she cried, bending forward, in an agony painful to witness.

"He is wounded the worst of any body," returned Cordelia, scarcely realizing what she was saying.

What a current of emotion went seething through Euphemia's soul at that moment! Pen is powerless, because language is inadequate to express any thing of the commotion she felt. Grasping a bonnet, which hung near, she opened the door.

"Where are you going?" her companion asked.

"Going to see him."

"But that will never do. You are too excited. It would affect him badly."

"I can be calm—see I" and she walked away like a moving piece of marble.

A moment later she was beside the pallid sufferer. No one chanced to be at his bedside, and walking directly up to him, she placed her hand in his.

"Are you much hurt, Eleazar?" she asked, bending over him.

"No, Miss Euphie," was the despondent reply, "the job isn't half done. Why couldn't these wretched Indians have made surer work of it?"

"Eleazar, Eleazar, why do you talk in this manner?" said the pained though not surprised maiden.

"Miss Euphie, I will tell you," was the sad reply. "My life will be a dreary waste without you. I tell you that, because it seems to me I shall die, despite what they tell me to the contrary. I don't want to live, for what is the use of a life filled with misery?"

"But you will live for my sake, will you not?" Euphemia asked.

A moment after, she half regretted it, but it was too late. An impulse she could not repress had urged her to speak, while the words had come forth spontaneously.

The sufferer's countenance lighted up for a moment, and then he exclaimed,

"I should not have spoken in such a manner. I should say that I could not live without your love, and that, I know, was given to Erastus. Poor girl! How can I tell you the sad news?"

"What is it?" she asked, while in her heart there was a presentiment of what it would be.

"Then you've not heard that we had a fight with the Indians, and he—poor fellow—was killed?"

"Can it be?" the maiden asked, turning away to hide the tears she could not suppress. After a short time, she turned again to the couch, saying,

"To-morrow you will be better; I will come in, and you shall tell me all about it."

She pressed his hand once more, and then turned away. How the night passed she never knew. A struggle was going on in her mind, but toward morning she became decided; so that she slept quite soundly for an hour or two.

True to her appointment, the following day saw her beside the wounded Eleazar, and from his lips she learned the story of that fearful ride to Austin.

As the reader is conversant with the incidents, we need not detail them again; it being sufficient for our purpose to say that, after the second squad of Comanches left the pursuing party, the race was short. Those remaining, although five to one, abandoned the chase soon after, and all wended their way back toward the west, where they subsequently made their appearance in the attack upon Cedarville. Arrived at Austin, a body of men was easily raised, and set out upon a hard ride to the besieged place the following morning. As

we have seen, they succeeded in reaching it that evening, having ridden a hundred miles during the day!

A day or two later Sam Reynolds returned, and he found his young friend doing well, under the care of the maiden whom he loved. But no words of passion passed between them. If glances and deeds could be considered as words, then something may have been said, but we do not speak positively.

Summer came, and side by side Euphemia and Eleazar often rode forth. There had been no further trouble with Indians, for the last lesson had been a practical one, even to their revengeful dispositions.

One fine day, as they were riding thus, the following conversation occurred:

"I've something to tell you," said the maiden mysteriously.

"What is it?"

"A secret!"

"So I supposed. But a joyful one, I judge, from your manner."

"So it is. Henry and Cordelia are to be married a month from to-day!"

"So soon?"

"That is the time appointed."

"Euphie, do you know what you told me that night after I was wounded?" Eleazar asked, after an awkward pause.

No reply.

"You told me to get well, and gave me hope. Now I want that hope realized!" said the young man, desperately.

"If I gave you hope I should be very cruel to disappoint you now," was the reply, accompanied with a look which spoke more than the words.

At the end of the month there was a double marriage at the house of Captain Tompkins, and when Henry Vincent stood proud and happy beside his blushing bride, Cordelia, Eleazar Roberts was experiencing very similar feelings beside his bride, Euphemia.

THE END.

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